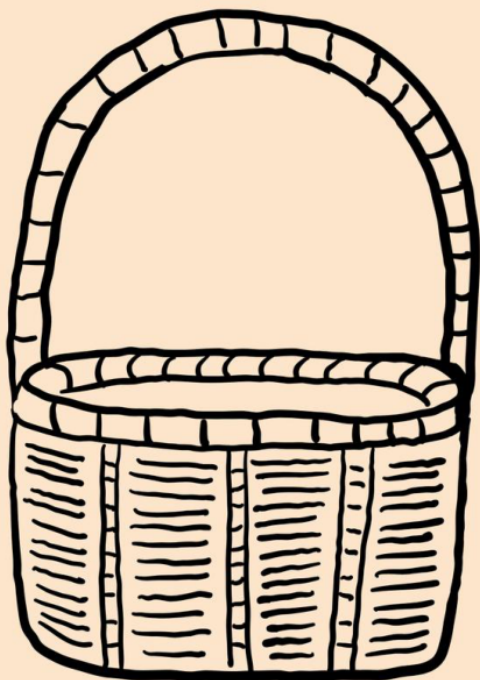


BASKETS



I N O M B U K

Baskets

Ino Mbuk

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BASKETS

by

Ino Mbuk

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The King's adviser

Once upon a time, there was a man who played the role of a king's adviser. He spent most of his days at the palace, listening to the king, nodding, and at intervals, offering his opinions and thoughts on certain issues that arose.

One morning, after the king attended to the guests who had travelled from a far distance to visit him, he told all his servants, except his adviser, to excuse him. As the last servant walked away, he called the servant by name and instructed that the doors be closed. The king remained silent. He stared at the doors and the empty window frame, then stood up from the huge, red chair he had been sitting in. He approached the wooden doors and stood there, then he moved towards the window frame and peeped out. He held his crown with one of his hands to avoid it falling and then looked down. There was no one there. He then moved to the wall and put his ear close to the wall and then turned around and smiled at Jambi. After that, he returned to his red chair. His adviser stood there in silence, without any expression on his face.

Jambi

Yes, my king.

Jambi

Yes, my king.

Jambi

Yes, my king.

How many times have I called you?

Three times, my king.

How many times have I called you?

Three times, my king.

Very good.

What I am about to say to you should not leave these walls. Do you hear me?

My king, if you want me to die today, I will. Your cough stays with me.

Very good.

Three is a crowd, so we are lucky. Aren't we?

Yes, my king.

Very good.

Jambi, something has been bothering me. I have sat with it,

slept on it, and I have exhausted what could be done with it. But I don't... well, there is a saying that two heads... two heads... well.

Jambi, I have arranged this meeting to speak about my crown.

Your crown? My king?

Yes, my crown. The one you can see on top of my head.

The king responded and slowly removed the crown from his head and stared at it.

I am all ears, my king.

The king chuckled and stared at Jambi.

Why wouldn't you be? Are you not my adviser?

I am, my king.

Jambi responded with a smile and bowed his head.

The king breathed out, then stared at the crown.

They say it is he who wears the shoe that knows where it pinches. Heavy is the head that wears the crown. They say this, they say that. Jambi, never in my life, never in my life, has a 'thing' made my life so unbearable as this crown has done.

The King paused and nodded

A few months ago, I noticed that whenever I took off the crown, there was a difference. I do not mean the lines on the scalp of my head or the weight of wearing the crown all day. It is just something else.

At first, I thought it was just my wife. The first one. I thought it was just her. But then I noticed, my other wives acted in the same manner too whenever I took the crown off.

In the moment of their acts, I tried to speak to them. Or at least get a reason for their daring disobedience. But they would not respond or even offer me their ears.

I was not asking as their king, which I am. But as a husband. Yet, they would not even entertain my presence.

At some point, I could not entertain their disobedience and the sheer disregard, so I acted out of character, too. Out of nowhere, I grabbed my crown beside my bed locker and put it on my head and instructed them to kneel.

I remember telling them, "Stand up from this bed, now! Go there! Kneel and face the wall!" I don't think I told them to face the wall. But I remember telling them to kneel down. I was furious and instantly reached for any object I could find. I just wanted to bring them to order.

Yes, my king, to bring them to order.

Jambi muttered under his breath, with his face a bit twisted.

I know you can't believe it, but here is the catch. Here is the catch. And in fact, this is why we are having this discussion. Jambi, can you guess what happened?

Hmm... no, my king. But did they at least move?

Jambi, you are getting the picture. They sprang up like a visitor or a guest walked into the room. In fact, one of them said, "My king, where were you?" Another asked me, "Why are you so furious and agitated?"

When I heard those questions and saw their reactions, it felt like the walls in my room had vanished. It was like I was in the middle of an empty arena.

My king, but why? What happened? Did they not hear you or see you?

That is the question. That is why we are here. And to even answer your next question, it is not just my wives.

The king held his chair and stood up. He walked towards the empty window frame, his long cape sweeping the floor. When he got to the empty window frame, he took off his crown and held it and then turned his gaze to Jambi.

Jambi, look at what I am going to show you.

The king dropped the crown on the window frame and stood away from it.

The room was quiet.

Jambi looked around. He moved from where he had been standing towards the wooden door. The doors were still locked. He moved towards the window. He could see the golden crown the king had placed.

He stared at it. So, the crown had just three pebbles, why did I think it was more or less? Jambi thought.

As he continued to look at the crown, he noticed that the crown had too many scratches, and it may need some repainting. It suddenly dawned on him that the crown may be older than most things in his own house and may even be older than he was.

He reached out his hand and picked up the crown. He inspected it, then noticed white hair strands stuck on the crown. He removed the white hair strand and dropped the crown on the empty window frame.

That is odd. How can the crown be that old, and there is still hair stuck to it? The wind did not even blow it off after all these

years, Jambi thought silently as he brought the hair closer to his nose.

“Aren’t we all a bit strange when we are alone, or think we are alone?”

Jambi abruptly turned around and saw the king smiling with the crown on his head.

Jambi immediately started laughing and fell on his knees. While on his knees, he moved towards the wall and grabbed the edge of the window frame and began to weep.

The king stood there in silence.

“Jambi.”

“Jambi.”

“Jambi.”

The king called. But Jambi did not respond and continued crying. After a while, Jambi stood up and apologized.

My king, I am very sorry. I know I have failed you.

The king chuckled.

Jambi, it is fine. After all, when you eat, do you notice your spoon? If we could see our spoon, we wouldn’t eat.

My king, that is true. But at least, I know that I am eating with a spoon.

Jambi responded.

The king laughed.

Jambi, that is true. But let us leave spoons out of this. Spoons are for eating.

The king responded as he moved to his chair. Jambi followed him and stood at the same spot he had initially.

My king, so what do you want me to do? Does this mean you will always have the crown on at all times?

Jambi, that is why you are my adviser. What do you advise? I have thought about this for months now. I am not just reduced to my crown; I don’t even seem to exist in the minds of anyone without my crown. All they see when I am without the crown is an empty room with walls.

The king paused and stared at Jambi.

“Jambi, what do I do? What do you advise?”

Jambi remained silent, bowed his head, and stared at the king’s cape and his crown. He turned around and looked at the doors and the walls of the room. A heavy breeze blew in from the windows into the room, and the weather outside darkened.

My king, I sense that you may not want to stitch or glue the crown to your head, and I don't know if the crown could be stitched or glued to your head.

The king soberly stared at Jambi and then looked at the walls. He took off his crown and examined its edges and rubbed the red pebbles with his fingers. Jambi stood there in silence, watching the king.

It will rain soon. It is good for the crops and farmers. The king said, smiling while still rubbing the pebbles on the crown.

My king, do you know your head's measurement? Jambi asked.

No, I don't, but you can measure it with your hands, can't you? The king responded.

My king, I can.

Jambi responded and moved towards the king's back. He used his fingers to measure a circle and stated that it was half-circle and twos. The king nodded.

Jambi asked for the crown to confirm if the measurement of the king's head corresponded with the crown. The king handed the crown to Jambi.

As soon as the king handed the crown to Jambi, Jambi ran towards the empty window frame and jumped out of the window with the crown.

Saturday's Event

"Mummy, Mummy, look! Birds are like planes. They go up and up like vrooooooooooom, and it seems like they are going to fall, they own the sky! Mummy, Mummy, look!" This little boy with only a few teeth kept screaming and tugging at his mother's clothes in a public area where other people were seated, enjoying their picnic.

"Junior! Sit down and stop making noise! Those birds are tired."

"Mummy, look! They are going up! Look!"

"I said, sit down! What is your problem? When did you start behaving like this?"

Little Junior sat down immediately. His face twisted into various expressions. He looked like he was about to cry, then clenched his fists and stared at the green field, remaining silent for the rest of the evening.

The mother tried different strategies to make Junior eat the sumptuous meal she had brought; she even tried to distract him by teasing him about the birds. She scooped a spoonful of jollof rice and said, "I will buy a toy bird for you if you eat."

"Open your mouth, say 'haaaaa.' Is my Sparrow still angry with me?" she teased, holding the wooden spoon with jollof rice close to his mouth.

It was Saturday, still early in the morning. Junior sat at a friend's event he was invited to. He wore plain black clothes and black shoes, which helped him blend into the small crowd of people present. There was a sense of decorum maintained by all the guests. Those who had known each other before the event didn't talk much. It was as if they had agreed only to pat each other's shoulders, slightly nodding while maintaining brief eye contact. Most of those familiar with each other did just that. Those who were not familiar didn't bother to interact; they simply looked for an empty seat under a canopy and sat down.

Junior looked around, observing the types of people who came to the event, their choice of black clothing, and how their faces made him feel. He also noticed the different ways people informed the person who invited them that they had made it to the event. They either walked up to one of the family members, who sat under a different canopy labelled "The Deceased's Family", shook hands, patted them, and then whispered something in their ears. Junior

watched this process go on for some time.

“Should I go and meet Bobby? Or would he understand?” he thought to himself. He dismissed the idea that Bobby would understand, as he had arrived early, and Bobby probably didn’t see him take his seat at the back of the canopy. Junior stood up and walked towards the front of his canopy, looking directly at the family members under the deceased’s canopy from afar. Bobby’s sister spotted him and tapped Bobby to look at his friend. Bobby looked at him, smiled, and waved. Bobby gave him a thumbs-up. Junior nodded and returned to his seat, feeling relieved. It was as if he was finally present at the event he was invited to, as if he was truly being a supportive friend attending his friend’s mom’s burial.

However, a part of him resented himself for not truly being there. He couldn’t properly participate in the mourning or even connect with whatever experience Bobby, and his family were going through. For the most part, Bobby knew how his mother had died. They were able to gather her body, properly wash her, and then dress her up before placing her in the coffin. Junior wouldn’t downplay her death or the pain their family must be facing, but beyond the whole experience, death’s certainty has always felt like seeing the sun, witnessing nightfall, or watching a child crawl, walk, and even begin to tell lies. In the same way, he could be present at this event, or he could also not be present. In the same way, his landlord collects rent and gives him a room to stay, the landlord could also have another tenant. Junior had accepted it. He even felt that most people had accepted swallowing this bitter pill.

It’s just that you only swallow your own bitter pill. Maybe this is why it is hard for Bobby and his family, maybe they have only swallowed their own pill and didn’t see that they would be left too soon with only memories of their mom. Maybe Junior was even thinking too little of Bobby. Perhaps Bobby had also accepted that he would no longer hear his mother’s voice or get her insight on some issues at some point. Yet, Junior still felt that the deceased’s family had something tangible they could hold onto, as graphic and bleak as it seemed. They could tell anyone that a speeding lorry fell over their mom, splitting her body in two, and she bled out instantly. She could not leave any words for her children or husband, but they could hold her. They could touch her hair, look at her wrinkled face, her birthmarks, and even inhale any scent of hers left before she was put into the ground. Depending on their

respective sentimentality.

On the bright side, they might even have a cause to fight for, maybe they could join groups that advocate for better roads or put up billboards against drunk and reckless driving. If their mom had died from cancer or kidney failure, they could join those groups. What Junior was simply saying is that they could build a sense of direction from how their parent left. Many people do this today, so he wasn't saying something out of context. Bobby was unquestionably doing better than Junior.

But what was Junior left with? What was this gradually fading memory of his mom trying to feed him at a picnic going to do for him? Is she dead or alive? Why did she leave her only child and run away? Junior's rational and understanding side did a lot of heavy lifting. He could deal with the fact that she was extremely young and had to raise him all by herself. He could also understand that she didn't have a home and was allowed to stay in that apartment, provided she worked as a cleaner there. All this prior information, he got to hear from the family he lived with, and in some sense, slowly understand what his mother's shoes must feel like. But what he couldn't understand was why she did not at least keep him with her relatives. Why didn't she visit? Where did she go? What was she doing all these years? What was her full name? Most importantly, Junior did not understand the context that led up to the recurring moment that his mind keeps circling back to. How did she manage to take out time for that picnic or have that much food to eat if that was her economic state and well-being? Or did they even have this picnic outing in the first place? Was he just fabricating a memory of a blissful time that probably never occurred? Why would she leave a child without any context? Is this world not devoid of a lot of contexts already? Even Kangaroos spend some time with their children at least, or was that her own way of spending time? What was going on in her mind?

Junior sat there, attending the event in his own way, while partly taking in some moments of the proceedings. When it was time to lower the coffin into the ground, he stared deeply at the deceased's family and his friend Bobby. At that very moment, he thought of those birds, the jollof rice, and even the flowers on the mat they sat on. "That's right, my mother had one of those trembling, soft voices."

The Monkey

From one house to another, I am always on the move. Not on the move with legs, or in a wheelchair, or with a big black leather boot. In contrast, I stand still. Glued to the wall. I am a big-sized portrait. My frame edges are silver. The image is a bare landscape. Yet for some reason, I have received uncountable visitors, I have been gifted, spoken about, pointed at, and even lived in luxurious houses. Although I am always in one room. Since I can't see myself, I can't contribute or comment on why I have received these countless features. But from what I gathered, I think it is because of the few trees some people have identified in the image. They speak highly of the artist, his brush strokes, blending; they have other terminologies they use to have this discussion. I can't recall all of them now. Some other visitors point at the sky, the horizon line. It is beautiful, it reminds me of that time. This set of people is reminded of something when they stare at the image. I have heard countless nostalgic moments, and I have even heard some of them recall their memories right before me. The other set of people are the ones who ensure I move places. I call them the numerical people. They either comment on my value and price. They like dates, time frames, and numbers. Or comment on how I may look on a yellow background, a white background, and how I may look if placed in the living room, the corridor, or in certain areas where I can speak. Where I can say something brief or extensive about the owner of the house.

On this note, I am going to tell you about this man and his monkey. His monkey's name is Monkey. He lives in a silver cage in the corridor, just before the stairs leading up. Monkey might be an actor, or maybe he deeply loves paintings. The monkey plays a confusing role. Confusing to me because I don't have access to the plot or his own scripts. He jumps up and down in the silver cage when the man and his household are around and when visitors come by. He stretches out his hand and touches his nose, and immediately the visitors laugh. Isn't he cute? Isn't he clever? Where did you buy this? This type of play goes on frequently. But interestingly, when they all leave, the monkey stares at all the paintings on the wall. He will scan all the portraits and stare intensely at them. Then gradually he shifts his attention to my

direction. He looks at the image in my frame and points at the horizon line and at the sky. Then he bows his head. Then out of nowhere, he begins to make all kinds of sounds. He mimics horses, cats, dogs, sheep, lions, birds, and even The Man's voice. He slowly stretches out his hands and holds his silver cage. In those moments, I strain my ears. To see if I could pick up on what he said. Shortly after his act, he gently squeezes himself out of the silver cage and goes upstairs. I can't see what he goes upstairs to do since I am positioned on the wall by the corridor. Then shortly after, he comes back with some food, silver earrings, and silver coins. He swiftly enters the cage with all these items and begins swallowing them. Then he looks up at the sky and horizon line, stretches his hands, and begins murmuring, and bows his head.

The man and his family return in the evening. It was a bit dark, but lights from the other room shone into the area leading to the stairs area. They walk in, speaking to themselves. As soon as they approached the corridor area where the monkey was. Their voices changed a bit. "Monkey! Monkey! what are you doing? Where are you?" I watched closely to see what would unfold. Monkey jumped up and stretched out his hand and touched his nose. They burst out laughing. Isn't he cute? Isn't he funny? Look at the way he jumped up. Monkey, have you eaten? They asked him and turned to each other in a way that shows it was likely a rhetorical question. I don't think he has eaten. Someone should make food for him. The man's daughter immediately grabbed her father's hands. Daddy, daddy, look. I think he has eaten, see the crumbs. The man rubs his daughter's head and rounds up his conversation with his wife. But then, when I look at the silver cage, I could not see the crumbs that I saw when the daughter had pointed. It seems the monkey had stepped on the crumb, or maybe he found out about it and had consumed it. After a while, the man turns to his daughter. What did you say? I said the monkey has eaten. How do you know that? My little Nostradamus. He rubs her head again. I think someone should feed the monkey. As soon as he said this, the man and his family went upstairs. The monkey immediately looked around his silver cage. Then he bowed his head.

Bikirini

In small villages, there is a tendency to think that only small events happen or that only small people live there, compared to big towns and cities. In small villages like Bikirini, there is one tailor, Pipping Thormus, who is recognized and sews everyone's clothes, there are two known supermarkets where you can get items, people love riding their bicycles on the sandy roads in the evenings, some young boys go out to play football in the open field, and the young girls kept to themselves a lot. Some evenings, they sat at the football field, chatting and giggling while also watching the game. It is always lively in a quiet way. Small village life. Just gentle laughter, screams, yelling, tall trees, familiar names, and faces. In terms of aspirations and dreams, people here seemed to share a predictable range of ambitions and dreams. Some dreams could be categorized into 'those who wanted something that could allow them to leave the village'; I like to call them the 'travellers or explorers.' To them, the village was too circular, too round; ideas easily circled back. They heard the same voices, opinions, ideas, faces, and so on, that it felt like waking up to a new day in continuity. Nothing could even surprise them. Just like the moon's appearance. The other group were people whose aspirations were tied to the village; they wanted to build the village, or rebuild it, or to be recognized in a distinguishable way for helping the village, and so forth. In a nutshell, the point is that there was some form of drive among them. They found something they could grasp and hold onto while moving in this small village.

Besides this context, there is a small event that took place in this village that stood out to me, your narrator, in a way that I could not fully explain to you in words. It is the type of situation where that made me realize that the only way I could let you see what took place in this village is to show you how it unfolded. This way, your age, experience, or even how you take in information may help you and me to fully 'understand' the event. If 'understanding' is your primary drive.

One Friday evening, a young man named Bassey sat on the grass within the large football field. The field itself was sandy, so the

grassy area was like an outer circle that enclosed the field. He sat there quietly with his 80-leaf exercise book and a pen. At first, I thought he was watching the match and trying to sketch the players since his gaze seemed to focus on the ongoing match. However, it turned out that his attention was solely on one of the five girls who sat a few meters away from where he sat. Who was he looking at? Was it the one who had not spoken since the match started? Or was it the one who seemed to be informing the other girls about who would likely score based on the previous matches? Or was it the tallest one, whose neck seemed longer than the rest? I couldn't tell at first, as the girls didn't look distinctively different. Yes, your intuition is right, it is the village, small cliques, etc. From a quick glance, you could almost sense why they were seated together or why they're friends. So, what was our artist sketching? Who stole his attention from the match? I quietly observed, waiting for the event to unfold more clearly.

When he was done, he folded the paper in a way that made it difficult to spot. He then continued to look at their group.

"When would she be alone? When is the best time to give it to her?" Bassey thought

At some point, one of the girls left the group, probably to ease herself. Immediately, Bassey's disposition changed. He stood up, dusted his trousers, and arranged his shirt. He hesitated a bit to be sure that the other girls weren't looking in her direction. Then he doubled his steps toward her.

"Hey, hey!" he said gently. She looked back and responded, "What?"

"I have something for you," he said hurriedly and gave her the folded paper. She took it, looked at him, and asked, "What is this?" while gently opening it. At that moment, he wanted to leave, but something kept him there.

"My eyes are bigger than this! I have egg eyes," she said. "Thank you for trying, but you shouldn't have," she added with a smile.

"Yes, thank you too," Bassey responded.

As a narrator, it's not clear what Bassey was saying 'yes to or why he was even thanking her. I'll take it that maybe the situation made him respond that way.

Bassey quietly returned to where he had earlier sat. It wasn't entirely as planned, but the initiation had registered in his mind as a significant leap, like watering soil, preparing to plant a seed. His

environment felt clearer and brighter, and even the people's faces appeared clearer to him.

From time to time, he kept looking in the direction she had gone. "When would she be back? Has she gone home? The match hasn't ended; wouldn't she and her friends go home together?" These kinds of questions came up a lot in his mind during that brief period.

Instinctively, he turned his head and caught her walking back toward her friends. "Oh, she's back!" She looked in his direction and briefly smiled, and he smiled back.

After she sat down, he noticed that her friends started to look in his direction. Some of them started giggling. One of them couldn't contain it and burst out laughing while holding his piece of paper, rolling-on-the-field.

Bassey knew at that point what his mistake was. He could have waited for the match to end and then tried to give the paper to her before she left. It's just that he knew there was a high possibility that he might not be able to reach out to her or single her out.

"Is she showing her friends the paper because she is proud of the situation? Or because of my ridiculousness? Was it an act worth showing and telling? Or maybe she didn't know I tried to meet her privately?" It was difficult for him to process the entire situation and why it unfolded in that manner. The intense laughter and giggling also didn't allow him to understand her state of mind.

He stood and went for a walk, circling the entire field. When he returned, he stood at a distance to observe where the girls had been seated. He couldn't spot them; instead, he saw a piece of paper on the floor and realized they had gone. They left before the match ended. He slowly moved toward the spot where they had been seated to inspect the paper. He wanted to satisfy his curiosity, as the field is often littered with papers, sweet wrappers, biscuits, and chewing gum.

As he touched the texture and saw the paper, he didn't need to open it. He knew it was a leaf from his exercise book. He instantly thought of quickly picking it up and folding it into his pocket. But as an artist, he felt there was more weight in letting it lie there.

The Gatekeeper

Bonust is a small city compared to Catigar or Aboma. In those big cities, there are many job options, and you even have the option of taking two jobs simultaneously, as opposed to small cities. In small cities like Bonust, depending on the kind of spoon you were born with, or if none, one is limited to a few predictable jobs. Some options may demand a CV. For instance, some high-class hotels in Bonust may request a CV.

“Can I see your CV?”

“Why are you interested in this job?”

So, they may be interested in some form of qualification and motivation, while some jobs in Bonust are also based on recommendation. For instance, house-help jobs are based on recommendation. A wealthy household, or a family where the wife has recently put to birth, or a family with many little kids, one of these setups, may look for a house-help. They do this by asking a relative, someone at work, people at congregations they attend, or even their friends:

“Please, I am tired. I really want a young girl who can assist me. I don’t mind if it’s a young boy. Do you know anyone?”

They would ask.

“I will ask around,” is a likely answer. Or:

“I know someone in the village, but I have to ask the family. Sorry, I can see you’re going through a lot. I will quickly reach out to them.”

So, it is by recommendation, not about qualifications or a "why are you interested in this job" type of arrangement. Both parties in this context always seem to know why the other person is before them, as opposed to CV jobs.

But in Zarusla’s case, it was different. His job was the kind that could either demand a CV or be obtained purely by recommendation. He is a gatekeeper. This kind of job in Bonust could be either gotten using a CV or by recommendation. Additionally, a gatekeeper is different from a security officer, so you do not need any formal training or weapons. All you had to do was open the gate when your employer or his family needed to go out and then lock it. When they are back, you’ll be on the watch for their horn or knock and open it. Occasionally, visitors would come,

and all you had to do was open the gate and close it. Then you receive your payment at the end of the month.

Zarusla is currently fifty-five years old. He has been a gatekeeper nearly all his life. He got his first job at 16 years old. This was for a private company called Paint-me-Quickly, it was owned by a man who came from a nearby state, Daudababigo, and who was involved in selling paint. People who wanted to buy paint for their new house, repaint their old house, or even just buy paint for any reason would come to the premises. Zarusla sat at a shed very close to the gate. As soon as he heard a horn, he would jump up and quickly roll the big black gate. It was one of those gates you don't push open but instead drag it towards your right. It had tires.

Zarusla really enjoyed it at that time. First, as a young man, it didn't seem like much to push the gate once in a while and get paid at the end of the month. He had the energy. His hands and joints did not bring any attention to themselves by making concerning sounds. Secondly, he had overheard that the man he worked for only hired people who were from his village in Daudababigo and would justify his choice by stating he felt safer around them and could trust them not to pinch his money. Upon hearing this, Zarusla was grateful that he was even employed. Plus, it sounded cool to mention to his peers that he worked in a company.

"Zarusla, where are you even working? What do you do?" they would ask.

"I work for a company. I'm just managing."

"That is so cool! A company?"

"Yes, a company!"

It had its own flair, as long as they didn't probe for details. Many people did not. Besides, Zarusla had learnt to immediately ask them the same question:

"What do you do? Where are you working?"

These "what do you do" or "what is it that you do" questions were often a powerful discussion filler and a good way to shift the spotlight from himself.

The company later replaced Zarusla. The owner decided that Zarusla knew the premises too well and had worked with the company for too long.

"Zarusla, I'm not terminating your contract because I doubt your competence. The company appreciates what you have done, and that's why we're adding an additional interest to what would

ordinarily be paid to you. Also, you seem to know the premises too well, and that's how ideas develop. I'm not saying you are that kind of person, but I am looking out for you. You need to work in other places, you know, gather more professional experience. You are still young."

The owner told him this as he handed him some money and requested the bunch of keys.

This was a significant moment in Zarusla's career. He tried getting other jobs, even another gatekeeping job, but he could not secure any. He missed the shed at Paint-me-Quickly. He had his red seat there and a comfy mattress close to the wall, where he could take naps when it was convenient. After all, the paint business is not like foodstuff; you don't have customers trooping in all the time.

He even missed a few regular customers he knew during his time there. There was one man, a contractor, who had the task of supplying paint for an ongoing building project in Bonust. He would always tease Zarusla for his short height.

"Small man, where do you get the energy from to drag this big gate? Don't let it fall on you one day," the man joked.

He was the type to repeat a particular joke all the time, maybe as a conversation filler, or maybe his curiosity was indeed piqued. Zarusla had developed a response over time:

"The gate likes my hand. I am also surprised, too," he would say.

After nine months, Zarusla got another gatekeeping job, this time for an eye clinic hospital. He worked there for 8 years. He had his own shed, although he didn't enjoy time to himself for long naps or staying inside. He was always opening the gate and closing it for most of the day.

"Are people's eyes that bad in Bonust? Who would have thought?" he would grudgingly mutter as he opened the gate.

Apart from the numerous visitors, he couldn't stand his pot-bellied employer and his megaphone voice. First, the employer never called him by his actual name; he would only snap his fingers, clap, or honk his car. If Zarusla pretended not to hear, which he often did, the man would instantly flare up and storm the shed.

"Hey, you! Look here! If you don't take your time, I'll sack you tomorrow. In fact, if you try me, you'll leave now. I'm not paying

you for this disrespect!”

To make matters worse, he was always screaming. Zarusla hated his tone, his voice, his face, and even the fact that he was his employer. Every morning when Zarusla woke up and remembered that he had to dress up and appear beside the blue gate, he thought of his former place.

“How have I even been working here for this long?”

One good day, Zarusla woke up very early in the morning. He stared at the walls of his room, which were still dark.

“No, no, no,” Zarusla repeated several times, shaking his head, and he lay back again.

That was the last time he ever saw the pot-bellied employer or his premises.

Later that day, he reflected on his decision. He felt a sense of purpose, like he took a step, like he was actually ‘doing something with his life.’ But this euphoria dwindled quickly. The next day, he became restless in his room. He became bored.

This boredom was different from the feeling he experienced while waiting by the gate. All his time as a gatekeeper, there were moments of boredom, especially just sitting under the shed and staring at the gate: watching lizards gradually run around, looking at petals, flowers, dragonflies hovering, ants making hills, the green grasses, sandy and loamy grounds, birds, or overhearing neighbours’ voices echo from their compounds. It felt like the world had always been and may never end. He could feel the now of everything in a unified way, like this is a great work of art, this is happening before me. And so, this type of boredom didn’t trouble him, it lured him to sleep.

Particularly, bird watching. He enjoyed watching the birds. And slowly, Zarusla would drift off without even noticing.

But this was not the boredom Zarusla was starting to feel. The type he now felt was the restless type, the kind that showed up when he saw his peer group wearing black suits, driving tall cars, speaking with a slightly updated vocabulary, and acting in a way that made him rethink whether they were ever his peers. Or when he saw his employers’ children, some younger than him, wearing suits, driving tall cars, speaking in a manner that grabbed attention. Even when they talked to him, they appeared extremely humble and respectful.

He had initially liked their humility and respectfulness toward

him. But when he watched how they conversed with their friends, parents, and other customers, he realized their humble nature was particularly tailored for him.

“How did it get this bad? What am I doing here? What is all this?” Zarusla thought.

It genuinely pissed him off to the point that he could only feel envy and jealousy towards them. Hatred, too. This was likely why Zarusla still worked for his pot-bellied employer for that long despite his resentment; he didn't lie to him. The pot-bellied employer told him the truth and acted accordingly.

Many months passed. Zarusla eventually got another job, as a gatekeeper for a boarding secondary school. The school job had its fun moments; he knew some students there, and he had another gatekeeper, Potora, who stayed in the same shed. So he always had company.

Plus, Zarusla had become very close to the bottle over the years. This was his 30s to 40s. He also added some parental and guardian remarks to his conversations. He would tell the kids:

“Take your school seriously. We have done our part. So work hard so that you can go places.”

It was his brief moment of parenthood, his chance to join the ‘elderly people are wise and want the best for us’ conversation, and a means of signaling to the students to see him beyond the shed he stood in. I mean, it is what his peer group should be telling kids.

Potora was slightly younger than him, maybe in his late 20s. Zarusla had a view of Potora. To him, he likely saw him as lacking an internal state; this is a borrowing of Murdoch's use of external and internal states to describe a character. Potora was fully present at the job even when drunk. He spoke highly of the job and never seemed to talk about anything else except the potential of the job to bring more money and the football matches lined up for the week.

He was not the type to say, “sometimes I wonder,” or “do you ever think...?” That may not appear as a realistic line of thought to Potora. He was a depiction of ‘going with the flow’ or ‘let's face reality.’ Zarusla found him mysterious throughout the time he worked at the school.

Presently, Zarusla works as a gatekeeper for the mortuary. He is fifty-five years old. He has a shed here, too. He can take long naps; it is always quiet. The gate is brown, rusty, and it is the type you open like a cupboard. One half of the gate is faulty, so that side is

slightly open, and it seems like it has always been that way for many years. I mean, who would rob or steal from a mortuary? Besides, it is just a bungalow.

Zarusla noticed that there was only one functional and error-free aspect of the mortuary, the rooms where they kept the bodies. Apart from that, the grasses were not trimmed. The building and its yellow paint had deteriorated. Some light bulbs in the corridors didn't work, and some switches were bad. Interestingly, his employer rarely visited the premises, unlike his previous jobs. It was like he didn't even want to be there.

"So why own this place? What was the idea?"

Additionally, people rarely came around, but when they did, they would cry and shout uncontrollably. Also, the balms applied on the bodies in the caskets were so strong that Zarusla could smell them from the gate area. In a nutshell, the place had its own undeniable seriousness.

As the bald French man would say, there was a time when people believed the soul went somewhere. Burials and mortuaries weren't taken seriously; there was no need for them. Which makes one wonder: would bodies just be left outside to rot or decay? Or given out for a cause? I mean, some do, for human progress, or even for their pet's well-being.

"I want my dog to do as it pleases with my carcass," someone had been rumoured to utter.

But now, or as of today, people seem to believe more in the process. In making and keeping the body in a certain way. In the act of burying. You could have an employer buried alongside his favourite pet, clothes, or even an employee, if it doesn't conflict with the law or norms. You need a shiny casket. You need balm to stall the decay for the occasion. And maybe a suit or gown, as the case may be.

Don't get me wrong, some people still opt for cremation, or other kinds, but hardly would their bodies be given to vultures, dogs, rats, or creatures that may have use for the carcass.

Zarusla went into his shed and finished up his drink before returning to the scene to watch the visitors he had just let into the premises.

Besides bird watching, this type of scene always showed him things he knew he would never learn, even if he had an additional 80 years to live.

The Romantic

Setting: It is Nsombodo night. Everyone in the village is excited. They gathered around in a large, open sandy field. They were all seated on the floor, and they made a large round circle in the middle for The Performer and his actors. There were burning sticks placed around the field. This made the performer and his actors visible, but the crowd less visible. There are drummers and singers playing drums and singing.

The Performer and his actors were seated in the middle of the circle. They all bowed their heads while the drummers continued drumming. After a while, one of the women who stood near one of the burning sticks suddenly beat a metal gong. The drummers stopped playing the drums, and the performer raised his head and stared at the moon. His actors did not move or raise their heads. The Performer stood up and pulled out a whip made of a cow's tail and flogged his actors one after the other. As he flogged them, they flinched and stood but did not make a sound. They immediately formed a circle around The Performer. The Performer knelt down and stood up, holding a big snake. The drummers started drumming again. The actors knelt down, and the woman beat the metal gong. The drummers stopped playing the drums.

“Today, I bring you the romantic,” The Performer shouted.

The audience cheered and clapped.

“Once upon a time,” as The Performer said this, the other actors sat down on the ground except one man. The performer began his narration again.

Once upon a time, there was a man named Imor. (The Performer pointed to the actor standing)

Imor was powerful and healthy. He could defeat a lion with his bare hands and even climb tall mountains. He was respected by people in his village, and nobody dared to look for his trouble. Imor did not drink palm wine and would not eat any animal if offered to him. Instead, he would go into the forest with a sack bag and gather leaves from the trees and pluck the fruit. One day, a tall, lanky man named Senza observed that Imor would not drink palm wine or eat any animal. (The second actor stood up as soon as Senza's name was mentioned.)

Senza decided to probe Imor.

“Imor, you are powerful and healthy. Why do you not drink palm wine or eat lions?”

“I was told the lion is the king of all animals. The lion answers my request whenever I am alone in my cave at night.”

“Is that so? Did you speak to your lion today?”

“I mostly speak to my lion at night. I will speak this night.”

Senza nodded and walked away.

This was the first time Senza felt he could defeat Imor. Senza immediately called a few of his close friends and told them what he had discovered.

‘Fellow Observers, Imor is not as powerful as we thought. We do not need to find his heels or cut any hair from his head. All we need to do is tell him that lions can become fish after many years, and fish can become monkeys, and monkeys can become people. Imor is deeply drawn to words that leave the mouth,’ Senza said with a beaming smile and sipped his palmwine.

One of Senza’s close friends responded,

“I do not believe Imor could be defeated by words alone. I do not even know when I will die, how can he believe me?”

Senza smiled and drank his entire palm wine.

“Imor does. Believe me, he does,” Senza responded and stood up from the stool he sat on.

“Senza, I know you are observant. I believe you. I just thought of a good idea.”

“What is it? Share.”

“Can you imagine what would happen to Imor if he found these things written on a tree? Or on the sandy ground close to where he lives? Or if it was written on the wall with charcoal?”

Senza laughed and rolled on the ground. He felt more powerful and healthy than he did before. He stood up and hugged his friend, who had also been laughing. The friend suddenly stopped laughing and tapped Senza.

“I do not think it is a good plan. Imor would know that the lion does not speak our language and cannot write,” the friend added.

“I have thought about that already. Do not worry about it. I do not expect Imor to notice, but I will have a chat with Imor to prepare him for when the lion would write.” Senza started laughing again.

The next day, Senza roamed around close to the location he was certain that Imor would be. He took note of where Imor went and

even followed him to the forest and saw the fruits he plucked and the leaves he grabbed. After Imor left, Senza went back to the forest and plucked the same fruits and leaves and took them with him. He waited until midnight, and he tiptoed to the front of the cave. He kept those fruits and leaves on the sandy ground, and he used his fingers to write "You will need them," and Senza left. Senza did this act for a few more days, and each time he would watch from afar to see Imor's reactions.

Each morning, Imor woke up and saw the fruits and leaves with the writing on the floor. He would cry and pick them up and return to his cave.

On the fourth day, Imor woke up and did not find any fruits and leaves. He decided to go to the forest and get them. On his way to the forest, Imor saw Senza quarreling with four villagers. Senza punched one of them on the face and shouted, "Do not drink palmwine! The lion has written. It is bad."

Imor was stunned. He paused and moved closer to the scene. As Imor approached, everyone became quiet.

"What did you say?" Imor asked.

"I told him not to drink palm wine."

"Why did you tell him not to drink palm wine? Do you not drink palm wine?" Imor asked.

"When I woke up this morning, I saw my keg empty, and I saw a writing on the ground. It said I should not drink palm wine again. I remembered you had told me you pray to the lion. So, I instantly understood what I had to do," Senza responded while maintaining eye contact with Imor.

"I understand. That is why he did not come," Imor responded with a teary eye.

"Who did not come? To where?" Senza asked.

"You would not understand," Imor responded and turned his eyes to the villagers who stood by.

"From today, nobody should drink palm wine. Unless you hear from the lion. Have you heard me?" Imor shouted.

"Yes, we have!" they shouted.

Imor went back to his cave, and he was never seen in the village again.

The Performer stopped speaking and motioned with his hands for water to drink. One of his actors, who had been sitting down, stood up and brought a big keg full of palm wine to The Performer.

The performer took big gulps from the keg and dropped the keg on the ground. The Performer started laughing and took his snake and walked away from the circle. His actors followed him, smiling. The crowd cheered and clapped. Someone in the crowd chanted “Lion! Lion! Lion!” and the rest joined them, and they all laughed.

The Renowned Actress

At that time, it was common for people to meet The Judge for all kinds of problems. So, people visited her to solve their conflicts they had with their friends, family members, other people, and even personal problems. At first, Lispect did not want to share her problems with any of her friends or family members and decided to include them in her stories. Lispect participated in and acted in many plays in the village. She also wrote many stories and was recognised in the village for her ability to invent new stories that were as good as the village's performer. But Lispect noticed that each time she included her problems in her stories, they would go away completely. But on the next day, she noticed that her audience only spoke about those problems she had included until they returned to her.

On one occasion, before Lispect eventually went to meet The Judge, she decided to bring it up during their family dinner. It was a quiet night after all, and the full moon was out. They all sat in a circle on the mat, and the food was placed in the middle. They washed their hands in a basin close by and began to eat the kpanguqor before them. Her younger brother would always slither like a snake after each portion he took. The father would shake his wrist in a jittery way after each portion.

"Is it not good to have a mother?" her mother would always ask the same question. And immediately, they would thank her and laugh. Just after the laughter, Lispect chipped in, "I do not think I want to tell stories or act in the public square anymore."

Her father stared at her mother and then at her brother.

"We are listening, go on," the mother said.

Her father and brother continued eating.

"After every story, I find myself in a mansion, and there are so many doors. My characters are in different rooms. When I walk into one room, I find it very difficult to leave. When I eventually leave, I have to open another door. The mansion is so big, and I do not even know how I got in," Lispect explained.

"Do you understand me? It is like being inside a house with countless doors, but you know all the people living there. But you cannot leave or even forget them."

Her brother interrupted her, "Mom, how much spice did you put

in the food?"

They all started laughing except Lispect. Her father eventually spoke to her.

"Lispect."

"Yes, father."

"Lispect."

"Yes, father."

"Lispect."

"Yes, father."

"How many times have I called you?" the father asked.

"Three times."

"Very good! We are not one of your audiences. Let us eat as a family. When you are in the public square, you can act or speak as you want. You would always have my support. Our support. I stand to be corrected."

The father added, "Do not say things that would make us laugh, and this food would choke someone. We all agree that you are good but know where to draw the line."

"But I cannot believe that we are all here eating food, but Lispect is in a mansion with many doors and can't leave. Who has eaten this portion of food then?" her brother added and pointed towards Lispect's portion in the tray.

They all laughed again. It was a memorable and fun night, although not fun for Lispect.

From then on, she decided to meet The Judge. But she postponed this decision. The Judge was known to mostly handle conflicts between two people. And if it was a personal problem, it could be that the person did not own enough mirrors and needed assistance on how to get a mirror or how to multiply the mirrors they had. In rare cases, the person may want to leave the village and may be contemplating how to leave the village. Either by performing acts that could lead to them being banished, or secretly running away from the village at night, or during a big carnival. All these considerations made Lispect hesitate. She wanted a solution but did not want to stand out in the mind of The Judge. She did not want The Judge to place her in any room or anything like the mansion where she kept all her characters.

"How can I overcome this and be free?" she asked herself.

"Would I ever be like the birds in the sky?"

Many years passed. Lispect had grown older. The villagers

commended her and told her that her abilities to tell stories and act had improved. Some of them brought their children to learn from her, and the performer delegated her to perform on his behalf, even during important occasions. One day, when the performer told her to perform on his behalf, she immediately called him aside.

“Why do you do it? Why tell them all these stories?” she asked the performer.

“I will die if I no longer do them,” the performer responded.

“You will die?” she asked.

“I will perish,” the performer said.

Lispect stood there staring at him. The performer tapped her on the shoulder and said,

“Now I understand. You went too close to Anansi. You are not supposed to. But see The Judge. The Judge could still help before it is too late. But go there with a mirror,” the performer said and walked away.

Lispect went back to her house and did not sleep. She consumed a lot of bitter kolas and stared outside her window. It was a quiet night, and the full moon was out. Her mind would momentarily drift to the conversation she had earlier in the day with the performer. It dawned on her that she had never thought about the performer or even seen him in any of the rooms within the mansion. She could not even recall any story he had told in the public square. She shook her head to snap herself from the unsettling thought and shifted her eyes to the moon. She noticed the moon had an etched colouring but looked like a round bag of ice and salt. The more she stared at it, the larger the moon became. It felt closer to her window frame for a few moments and then suddenly very far away. Like an egg placed around a large charcoal.

She paused and turned around. She noticed three big, framed paintings. One was a cub in a green garden, another was a close-up image of a lion, and the last one was an image of an old woman. “Whoever placed these frames must be extremely tall. Or did they use a ladder to hang them there?” She stared at the cub in the green garden and noticed that the lioness had been included, too. Lispect turned her eyes to the frame with the lion and then back to the cub, she noticed that the lion had also been included in that frame, but it was just placed further away from the cub and the lioness. Lispect blinked and shook her head. She sprinted towards the door, which was unusually small compared to how tall the room was. She

turned the knob and pulled the tiny door towards her. She opened the door but did not let go of the knob. She looked around. She noticed that there were many doors adjacent to each other in the hallway. She looked to her side to see if there were doors adjacent to the room she was in and noticed there were many doors adjacent to that room too. She clutched the doorknob. She clutched it tightly till she could feel the indent it left on her fingers. She looked down at her fingers and saw three bitter kolas in her hands. She looked up and saw her room's window frame. It was still dark, and the moon stood in its position. She got up from the stool she sat on and went to her bed.

As soon as Lispect heard the cock crow, she got up, washed her face, took some mirrors with her, and went to see The Judge.

She arrived early at The Judge's house. The front of the house was extremely quiet. There were no doors in her house except long beads, which were used as a cover. The beads rattled when the wind changed, and at intervals, Lispect could see the corridor and the insides of The Judge's house.

Lispect stood there, wondering if she should shout "Judge" or if she should make a sound. "How can she not have a door?" Lispect wondered. She had never visited The Judge for any reason. Lispect found a stick nearby on the ground, she picked it up and moved close to the wall. Just as she was about to hit the wall, she heard a voice.

"Lispect? Is that you? Please come in. The performer told me you would come. I really like your stories," the voice said.

Lispect looked up. She thanked The Judge and walked inside the room. The Judge's house was breezy. She had only a mat on the ground and a big portrait of a lion on the wall.

Lispect was startled when her eyes eventually saw the portrait on the wall.

"Why do you have that?" Lispect asked.

"Have what? The lion?"

"Yes."

"I do not know. It is a picture of a lion. You know, they say the lion is the king of all animals. So, I thought, why not? Besides, I had one of a cub and one of a famous actress. I do not know her, and I don't know when these paintings were made," The Judge responded.

"So where did you find them?" Lispect asked.

“Have you come here because of the paintings? Or for another reason?” The Judge asked as she pointed at the mat for Lispect to sit.

Lispect walked towards the mat and sat on it, and The Judge sat on the mat too.

“So, tell me, why did you come to see me? And have you brought the mirrors?” The Judge asked.

“Yes.” Lispect pulled the mirrors out from where she had concealed them and handed them to The Judge. The Judge examined them and kept them and placed them under the mat.

The Judge then motioned Lispect to speak. Lispect narrated her problems to The Judge. She told The Judge about the mansion and what occurs each time she is done telling a story and acting in the public square.

The Judge sat still for some time, staring at Lispect.

“Why do you do it? Why do you tell stories? Why do you act?” The Judge asked.

“At a young age, I found out I was good at telling stories and acting. That is why I do it,” Lispect responded.

“Who did you find this out from? Who did you tell your first story to and why?” The Judge asked.

“Who did I find this out from?” Lispect repeated the question.

The Judge nodded.

“How am I supposed to know? And how does this help me?”

“I know you cannot see the performer in your mansion, and I know you cannot make any story about the performer. Does that not surprise you?”

“Surprise me, that you know. Or that I cannot see the performer in my stories?”

The Judge smiled and stared at the mat. The beads rattled as the breeze came in.

“How do you come up with the stories you perform? And when you act, what roles do you usually act?”

Lispect paused. She had never had any difficulty with coming up with stories and had never had any reason to ask how she came up with them. She only had to open her mouth. As for performance, she was always surrounded by people. All she had to do was watch them.

“I do not know. I just tell stories I find interesting and act any role I want to,” Lispect finally responded.

“Then why do you not tell any stories on The Performer? Why have you not acted in his role? I know he has delegated his position to you on some occasions. But why do you not act as The Performer?” The Judge asked.

“I cannot be as good as The Performer. I do not even understand why he tells stories. So how can I act as him?” Lispect asked The Judge.

The Judge pulled out the mirror she had placed under the mat and showed it to Lispect. “Look into the mirror.”

Lispect looked.

“What do you see?” The Judge asked.

“I can see myself. My reflection.”

“Very good,” The Judge said.

The Judge stood up and threw the mirrors out of the window. She turned and stared at Lispect.

“Any day you want to leave the mansion, you can. But if you do not leave that mansion soon, you may never leave the mansion. But note: The Performer would narrate your story very soon if you do not leave,” The Judge said with a stern voice.

Lispect stared at The Judge. The Judge told her that she would be expecting another person to arrive.

Lispect thanked The Judge and left. On her way home, she saw The Performer, and she approached him.

“Why would you want to tell my story to the audience?” Lispect asked him.

“Because a lost puppeteer is a more interesting story to tell than a lost puppet. A puppet needs to know that if it smiles from chin to chin, the puppeteer will smile from chin to chin. And may never stop smiling,” The Performer smiled and walked away.

The Mannequin

Once upon a time, there lived a man called the Big Man. The Big Man's actual name was unknown. When he used to live among neighbours, they often just described him as the Big Man who lived in a bungalow and who killed a cow every Friday evening. He had no known relatives, no known job, and even how he happened to get the house he lived in was not known.

In terms of his appearance, his name said it all. Despite being the Big Man, his face needed further description. He had a memorable face. His eyes were unusually big. And his face just stood out for other reasons. Plus, he had a big black beard, muscular arms, and was often seen with a rough-looking axe. He was also really tall. There were stories that he could uproot a tree if he wanted to. People had different accounts to support their theories on why they thought he could uproot a tree.

A few years later, we discovered that the Big Man was not surrounded by any neighbours. His bungalow remained, but all the houses around him were empty. He still killed cows every Friday as usual, although he had an additional routine. He would randomly choose a house to visit and take items to eat and clothes to dress up his mannequins. He would find assorted items from the fridge, refrigerators, cupboards, and so on. And he would find dresses, gowns, skirts, and makeup to dress and decorate his mannequins.

He had different types of mannequins. Some were tall. Some are a little bit short. Some plump. Some big. Some are slim but not skinny. There was no point in having skinny mannequins around after all, he was the Big Man. It was not entirely clear why he did not have skinny mannequins or even why all his mannequins had to meet a certain threshold, or why he kept all of them underground.

Nobody ever visited his bungalow and left afterward, so there was an implicit no-disclosure policy regarding his premises. So why store or keep all the mannequins underground? Where the sepia lights were always dim. And stuffy? What did he get out of storing his collection underground? Of what use was an artwork that only he could see? Did they exist if they couldn't be seen?

Over time, it may have been difficult to tell if they were there when you couldn't speak about them, or show them, or even move them from one point to another. But that was the thing. Another

problem the Big Man had. If other people could see two steps ahead, or three steps, or four steps, the Big Man could only see what was in front of him. At times, he even struggled to see what was in front of him, and he suffered the consequences.

He damaged some of his collection. Some mannequins had one leg; the axe had taken off the other. Some had a big tribal mark on their faces. Some had unusually long fingers. Some he had accidentally tattooed on their backs, hands, and tummies. He wasn't even into tattoos but had to live with his collection having them. He would grunt and stomp his boot. The dust on the floor would rise.

One day, it rained heavily. He was in his living room, just looking out of the window, and his axe was on top of the wooden table. He shifted his gaze from the window and paused.

"Was that a voice?" he thought. Or was it the rain?

He gently stood up and picked up his axe. Instead of heading out the door, he gently bolted it and went to his dining area. He unbolted the lock and lifted up the heavy wooden slab. He stared down into the dark basement. Then he went to his kitchen to light up the lamp.

While he attempted to light the match, he paused again. By this time, he was convinced that it wasn't the rain or the birds. Most times when he heard a sound, it was either the wind blowing an empty can, or ruffling a neighbour's roof, or the wind slightly moving the only wall poster he had in the living room.

He had a big poster of a woman. She seemed to be in her thirties or forties. She wore a big fur-like brown coat. She had red lipstick, big, round earrings, and a bright, wide smile. This big portrait looked old. It even seemed to be as old as the bungalow he lived in, if not older.

The only other decoration in the area was a big yellow note on the big, tall fridge in the kitchen.

"Please, try to contact me if you see this note. xx Ann."

This was written with a red or maybe pink marker or ink. It was difficult to tell as the yellow note was slightly faded. There were traces of missing bits on the fridge, but that was all. Anything that could be understood had been removed.

The Big Man stood close to the fridge with the matchbox, which seemed little in his hand. His breath was heavy. Heavy enough to make little footsteps and tiptoeing difficult to decipher.

He immediately dropped the matchbox and lamp on top of the

cabinet in front of him. And he quietly lifted his big axe from the top of the tall fridge. He dashed out from the kitchen and into the dining area. He stood still and stared into the deep, dark square hole at the center of the dining area.

The rain stopped, too.

All that could be heard was the wind tossing the empty cans and items outside.

The Big Man refused to leave. He stayed longer.

Then he went back into the kitchen, lit up the lamp, and proceeded into the basement.

Bump. Bump. Bump. Bump. His heavy footsteps stomped the stairs until he was fully in the basement.

He looked around and instantly went towards his collection.

He inspected them.

They looked back at him.

They had their makeup on. Their dresses were intact. The ones he had dressed in gowns still had them on. Some were sitting on the chairs he had made for them. Some were lying in the wooden coffins he had placed them in.

He slowly placed the lamp on a nearby stand, where he often kept it. Maybe out of habit. Humans are indeed creatures of habit, after all.

He still held on to his axe while he moved towards the left, the other side of the basement. He had recently changed the dress of that mannequin. When he went out to get food from his neighbour's house, he saw a dress he thought would look good on one of his mannequins and decided to spice things up a bit. Besides, this mannequin had recently had a wardrobe malfunction.

Why not kill two birds with one stone?

Or axe, maybe, in his case, he thought.

So, as he approached the location, he realized that the spot was empty.

He punched the wall with his left fist and stomped the ground.

He quickly ransacked the place.

As he went towards the other angle of the room, he saw the mannequin in an old coffin, gently lying there.

He went close to it.

He looked at the legs, the tummy, and the face of the mannequin.

The eyes were wide open. The makeup was still how he had

applied it, and so there was no point in concern.

"I guess that must be one of the perks of living alone. You get anxious over nothing," he thought.

He went around for another clean and thorough inspection, just to be sure.

After all, he doesn't cause any harm by double-checking.

Plus, you can never be too sure these days.

After that round, he gently went up, locked the basement, and headed back to his seat.

An Old Couple

I overheard a couple stuck on a canoe in the middle of the ocean. The old man and his wife.

It is strange. We haven't stepped out of this ocean. Not even once. It is still the same thick water. I can still see my reflection. Even though sometimes when I stare too long at my reflection in the water, I become afraid. Afraid that it may pull me in, but what bothers me most is not my reflection but all these other peddlers who keep telling me that I don't know anything about canoes. Or the oceans. Is it because of my shirt? Is it my shirt?

I don't think it is your shirt. Look at us. Just look at us. All the lines. I think we even have more lines than this canoe that we are seated in. Look at your hands, your legs, your face. Look into the water. She paused mid sentence and shifts her gaze to the water and stared in. The old man sat there staring at her, staring into the water.

She slowly diverts her gaze towards him. Look! You would not fall in. Just look into the water. Look at yourself now. She pointed her hands at the water.

The old man remained still and grudgingly uttered 'But that is how you fall in.' Do not tell me you have been looking in."

Yes. I have the courage, unlike some people.

I do not think it has anything to do with courage. Or even 'having' courage. I once heard we were never meant to see our faces.

I don't believe it. Who did you hear it from? The old woman asked as she heaved heavily.

From one of the passersby. The old man responded while staring into the sky. It was on the night when you slept off and I was guarding the canoe. I still remember. That day it was surprisingly very cold; we were at the center of the ocean as we are now. I started to feel like I was about to drift away, but I did not want both of us to leave the canoe at the same time. I quickly checked my pocket after I noticed I may have briefly drifted away. I kept slipping away and reappearing, slipping and reappearing, slipping and reappearing. Each time I reappeared, I saw that you had gone away. I did not know where you went that night. I saw your still hands and emotionless face. I could not figure out where you had

gone. It became extremely cold, so I covered your hands and chest.

Did you notice?

Notice what? You staring at my still hands and emotionless face? I thought you said we were not meant to see our faces.

Well, I don't know. I don't know. You know how deep I can go. I did not notice.

That is fine. I know. I know. You slip away easily, and you roam deeply. The old man muttered and made a snake-like movement with his right hand.

So, after I covered your hands and chest. I quickly checked my pockets, and I found kola nuts. I still had two. I put one of them in my mouth and chewed it. And then something, I don't know what. Now I think of it, it was a push, like how we paddle our canoes, but this one, it was not my hands that were behind the push. Or maybe it was the wind. Yes. Maybe. It was windy that night. So, it pushed me to bow my head. So, I gently obeyed it. I bowed my head, and it told me to squint my eyes. I squinted my eyes. As soon as I squinted my eyes, the sun ran up from the end of the ocean towards the center and was directly on top of us. I still did not look up, but I could feel it staring at the top of our heads. Then it ran towards the end of the other side of the ocean. The moonlight returned. I could taste the particles of the kola nut in my mouth, and my feet were cold. I stared at your feet. I remember looking at your toes. The tortoise head toe, the big one and I noticed that we need to do something about our nails. I fixated on you reappearing that night. I wish that you would reappear from where you went so that I can tell you what just took place. I still bowed my head and waited a bit. I had another feeling that I shouldn't yet reveal that I was present. So, I just stared at your toes and the canoe with my head tilted.

Do you know what happened next?

What?

From the corner of my eye, I saw a very tall, lanky man walking on the ocean. At first, I thought that the sun's brightness made my eyes interrupt with my ability to understand my surroundings. So I raised my head and looked in the lanky man's direction. I could not believe my eyes. I saw a very big mansion, which was under construction, and I noticed that the lanky man was an architect or an engineer. He kept dishing out orders and instructions. The mansion seemed almost done, there was a lot of yellow colours

surrounding the mansion, and I tried to listen to what the man was instructing the workers to do. I couldn't understand a word. It seems it was another language. They don't speak like us, they didn't use boats or canoes, and the mansion was on top of the water, or maybe a little bit above it.

As soon as I stretched out my hand to tap you. The man stood closer to our canoe. Everything became silent. It was no longer cold; it was not hot either. Everything became suspended, even the water did not ripple. He stared at me for a while, till I could recall the first moment we entered the canoe, and as I kept looking at the very tall, lanky man, I saw that this ocean had not always been here; there were many trees in this area now surrounded by ocean. Then, I now saw a man, the man was trying to catch an animal, he chased it and fell on the ground in this thick green forest. He stood up, and he made hen sounds and pig noises. Then he immediately opened his mouth and was about to speak to me. Before he could speak, the lanky man called my name.

He then drew on the air with his hands a circle.

I asked him, what, what? Circle?

He drew it again, but this time, in a way that seemed like he was pointing at me. I said 'my face'.

He nodded.

Then he called my name again. And said, 'You are not supposed to see your face'. And then I noticed the kola nut particles in my mouth and started chewing them again. When I raised my head, I looked around; everywhere was dark, you were not around, and the cloth I used to cover you had slipped. So, I pulled it up again.

That is interesting. So, is that why you think we are not supposed to see our faces?

Yes. Besides that, of what use has seeing your face caused you?

The face is an artwork. I don't think there is any harm in seeing your face or not seeing your face.

Are we just going to be on this canoe in the middle of the ocean and one day travel to another place without seeing our faces here?

Where do you want to go to? Which place? The Mansion?

I did not see the lanky man or the mansion. So definitely not there.

So, you want to go to places you have seen?

I don't even want to choose. Just like I did not choose this canoe or this ocean.

That is interesting. But where have you been slipping off to? The Old man finally asked his wife.

If you tell me where you have been slipping off to, I will tell you mine. The wife retorted

I don't think you know

I know

Okay, so where have you been slipping off to?

(laughter)

I will let you in but promise me you won't get missing. You have seen my legs and all these lines on our bodies. The old woman stated while making the snake-like movement with her right hand.

One time, it was a bit dark, the sun had completely left the sky, and I could see the full moon. I saw myself in a white long gown approaching this huge rocky mountain. It was extremely windy. My hair kept covering my face. I will push it to the side. At some point, I tried to tie it. I think I tied it. I looked around to see if I would find anyone or even a lamp. I could sense that something was happening at the other side of the mountain. Now I think of it, maybe it was because I heard hen sounds. It is almost like a thousand hens were simultaneously making noises at intervals. But they were invisible, or maybe on the other side of the mountain. I kept looking everywhere for the hens. I doubled my steps. The next thing I know, I heard boom. I screamed and looked down. I had stumped my foot on a rock. I remember shouting and holding my foot. I saw my toenail, the tortoise head one you referred to, I saw that that toenail was off. So, I lay down on the floor. I could feel my hands covered in liquid; you know, I can't stand blood, so I did not look. I just held my toenail in one hand and used the other hand to hold my tortoise head toe. Then the hen sound became unbearably loud and close by. So, I tilted and looked down, and I saw I was holding a white cock with a red comb. It looked at me and blinked. It blinked again. Then I looked around and saw two boys riding a bicycle in a long corridor. It wasn't properly lit. I remember thinking, how are they even going to see their way. The older one was riding, and the junior one stood beside watching him.

Stop! Stop! Are you lying to me? The Old man suddenly chipped in

No, I am not. Let me finish.

Why do you think I am lying?

That is my brother. I told you this.

That is not true; all these years, you have never mentioned having a brother.

I have. I told you this one night. I remember.

Okay, so if you did, what was the junior brother wearing? What colour of shirt?

He was not wearing a shirt

(laughter)

An avid reader

Once upon a time, a deaf young man came across a secret while reading a book in the library and did not know how to inform those around him. He was an avid reader and had developed a habit of living vicariously through the stories he read. He had his favourite corner, which was the underground section of the library. It had no windows and was a perfect spot to momentarily travel into another room or even cities in the books he read.

However, one afternoon changed everything.

He came in early into the library early and he saw this book titled 'The Woman and Her Only Daughter', the book's cover showed an elderly looking woman seated on the floor in a darkly lit room, and then her daughter sat behind her on a stool while plaiting her hair. She had braided most of her hair. The man stared at the cover, then he diverted his attention to another book, titled 'The Artist in Love with Her Paintings'; this one had a bright cover and an image of a hand reaching out to a blue sky. The second book was not appealing. The title of the book was too noisy. It felt like it wore its plot on its sleeves. Nobody wants to read about an artist who probably has amnesia and cannot recall the artworks they have made. How different would such an artist really be from us? He dropped the second book and looked at the first book again. This time, he read the title again, but aloud. Then he looked at the image. He realized that there were no window frames in the room where the mother and her only daughter sat. He nodded his head unconsciously and took the book to his favourite corner.

From the first paragraph, he could sense that the author may have designed the room in a certain way. The room did not include any mention of lightbulbs, boxes, or anything that stood out in a noticeable way. But instead, the room had only the mother and her only daughter in it with a lantern. 'What time is this story set in?' he paused and reread the first paragraph. It did not change or answer his question, so he kept reading. As he read, he observed, and he kept picturing his parents and the scent of their room. It was the image of his father and mother debating while making intense hand gestures. He stood there. Just looking out of the tiny window in their room at a bird flew by with a stick in its mouth. His eyes fixated on the black bird with the stick in its mouth and gradually

noticed the blue sky. That image, a bird with a stick and a blue-sky background, and the outer window frame made the moment feel like a portrait.

He abruptly shook his head and closed the book he was reading.

He stared at the cover of the book like doing that would offer him an exit. It did not. He could not shake the image or its frame.

He did not bother to return the book to the shelf. His surroundings felt too bright. He stood up and ran out. When he got to his house, he took off his shoes and put it in the bin and then he dragged the big bin into the house. He put all his cutlery, mirrors, lightbulbs, toothbrushes, combs, and his two pillows inside the bin. And then he sat down on the floor in the kitchen, bowed his head and stared at his legs, hands, fingernails and the veins in his body which looked like sticks with branches. Then he shifted his gaze to the floor and looked at the tiles. His eyes followed the lines within the tiles' patterns until they did not show him anything new. They only reminded him of the portrait he saw while reading the book.

He looked up at his ceiling. Then he noticed that the kitchen bulb was still intact. He jumped up, climbed the cabinet, and removed the bulb. Then he went outside his house to the backyard with the bin and flung it there. He searched around, found a shovel, and went back into his house. He tried to get the tiles out, but he could not. He kept hitting the surface and cracked some parts of the tiles, but that is all he could do. He lay down on the floor and slept.

The next day, as soon as he opened his eyes, he made up his mind to share the secret he had learnt with everyone. 'Of what good is a picture when it is always coloured? Every day I went to the library to read stories I wrote. I have been in love with my paintings all along.' The man muttered under his breath while he was putting some of the items he had discarded in his backyard into a school bag. His hands just kept grabbing and putting. It was still a bit dark as it was very early in the morning.

When he was done, he zipped the school bag and left his house. He did not put on his shoes, and he still had the same clothes on.

Fortunately for him, it is still dark, so his bare feet or his dishevelled appearance may not be noticeable to anyone or cause any jarring discomfort to anyone. Although he kept looking over his shoulder and doubling his steps. Then, when he passed the first house, he returned to the house, glanced left and right, and stared at it again. There was no one. Additionally, the owners' outdoor

light was off.

‘What if they had dogs?’

‘But what if they don’t?’ he thought and threw his bag across the fence and immediately jumped over the fence. The moon was on his side; from the little light it offered. He surveyed the surroundings and proceeded to the window area. The frog or cricket noises were loud. The big house oddly reminded him of how the library was, especially after reading very long stories. He ignored the thought and feeling and stared at the huge building before his eyes.

‘We are all human beings, and yet look at how odd it feels to be in another person’s house? Is he not my brother or sister? Why do I feel unwelcome?’ he thought as he proceeded to the window and tried to push it. ‘Can you believe it? The window is locked.’ He shook his head and went to another window. He noticed all the windows he had tried were locked. He stood there looking at the doors. Immediately, two black birds flew very close to his head level and went in a different direction. His eyes followed them, and when they had disappeared, he suddenly thought of the portrait again. He suddenly noticed a silhouetted figure standing in the dark. He squatted. And crossed his fingers. ‘How long has that person been there?’ he thought. The person he saw did not move or speak. It just stood there in the dark, looking at him. ‘I don’t have all day, plus I need to share what I have learnt with as many people as I can.’ He summoned courage and approached the silhouette. As he moved closer, the person did not move. When he finally got very close to the person, he noticed he could perceive his parents’ room scent. He swallowed his saliva. He raised his hand to grab the person’s shirt, and he felt a big stick, a log of wood. He chuckled and shook his head. He looked around and saw a stick that could break one of the glasses and picked it up. He rushed towards one of the windows in their backyard and broke it. He tiptoed in, opened his school bag, and dropped two spoons and a stick in their kitchen, and then he went around their house looking for toilets and bedrooms. He went in and stole their mirrors, and he left their house. He proceeded to the next house and dropped any item he could find alongside a stick, and then he would take their mirrors. He succeeded in entering twenty houses. When he entered the twenty-first house, the cock crowed; it was daylight. The owners woke up and caught him in the act of taking their mirror. They shouted and immediately seized him. They brought him outside and

called the other neighbours. They all came out, confirmed that they had noticed that their mirrors were missing, too. When they came out to check, they found their windows broken. They surrounded him and asked him who he was and why he entered their houses to steal their mirrors. He sat on the floor, smiling, and then looked up at them. They had formed a square box around him, and some of the neighbours held sticks in their hands to flog the truth out of him. He pointed to his hands and legs and used his fingers to trace the visible veins on his arms and legs. This seemed to agitate the neighbours. They raised the sticks and beat his head and entire body while calling him names. One of them then shouted, "What do you want to do with our mirrors? Tell us!" Another person shouted, "Maybe he does black magic," someone said. "He wants us to disappear."

After a while, the neighbours came up with a better way to deal with him. They decided that they would get a horse from one of the neighbours who owned a horse and tie him to the horse. They announced their plan to the hearing of the man, to see if it would make him reveal why he broke into their houses to steal their mirrors. He still did not respond.

They brought the horse, another neighbour brought out a rope, and they tied him to the horse, and then they triggered the horse to run. The horse ran instantly. The man screamed. He sustained life-altering and bodily-altering bruises. Sand and dust entered his eyes at some point, so he had to close them. When the horse took a break, he managed to open his eyes. He noticed two birds flying in a blue sky above him with a big white egg, and he closed his eyes and screamed. The horse sped off.

The Woman and Her Daughter

It was pitch dark outside. But inside the room, a woman and her daughter were still awake. They had a little lantern placed on a wooden table close to where they were seated. The woman sat on the floor while the daughter sat on a wooden stool behind the woman. She was weaving the woman's hair. Both of them were talking, giggling, and laughing at intervals. There were moments when they would both go silent. You could hear the frogs and insects communicating and even hear the woman and her daughter's breathing styles. The woman breathed like a hiker and cleared her throat after every giggle or laugh. The daughter's breathing required closer attention to pick up on.

'Mummy don't be offended, but your shoulders are very broad. It just flashes in my mind every time and goes.'

(Both laugh)

Let it flash. It shows how empty your mind is. Some of your age mates are building castles in the air. You are there with my shoulders. 'It just flashes in my mind every time and goes.'

(Both giggle)

But speaking of shoulders, this just reminded me of something. (chuckles) You just unlocked a memory. There was this woman I heard about when I was very young. They used to call her Madam Big Shoulders. Now I think of it, I don't know if our parents used to tell us this story to frighten us, or if the woman indeed existed and was drowned to death. I found the story very strange as a child. In fact, I never went to the stream alone and did not go to the stream late in the evenings because... what if she is a ghost?

So, they buried her in the stream or drowned her? What did she do?

I will tell you but first get up and check if the window is open. Don't you feel the mosquitoes?

I can. Let me check.

The woman's daughter stood up from the stool and went towards the window frame. She stretched her hands towards the window frame, and her hands went all the way outside.

That is strange. No wonder it is this cold.

What is it? So, all along the windows were open?

It's not even the windows. The entire frame is empty. Like

somebody carved out the entire window from the wall.

(Both laugh)

Just tell me you want me to get up from this floor.

I am not joking. The frame is empty.

The woman stood up and approached the window area. She stretched out her hand, and it went all the way outside. She touched the edges of the frame in disbelief.

Hmmmm...

The woman went closer to the lantern, picked it up, and went towards the window area. Her breathing was heavier than usual. She stared at her daughter and then stared at the window.

Go and bring one of my wrappers. Let us cover it at least.

Okay.

The daughter brought one of her wrappers, and both of them found a way to cover the empty frame. Then they returned to their sitting positions.

(Both laughing)

Are you still going to tell me that Big Shoulders story?

If you still want to hear about it. Why not? At least we have a wrapper over there.

(Both laughing)

Well, Madam Big Shoulders is a popular story. Or at least, popular in my time.

'Mummy,' the daughter interrupts her, "Please, don't say 'in my time.'"

Why? Are you feeling left out?

It's not that. Just that...

Just that, what?

Don't you... Don't you sometimes feel like it was yesterday? Like all this took place yesterday. Or are things...

Are things what?

Like all these... like is all this, far away?

Well, my daughter, far away or not far away. I am certain that my father, who was buried when I was 8 years old, probably has termites or insects crawling out of his eye sockets. There is probably a smelly, dried-up, rotten intestine there, or even that stupid, oversized suit we put on him has probably decayed. Or the cheap coffin we got for him. I don't know. Is my hair not getting whiter and whiter?

Tell me. Is my hair not getting whiter and whiter?

Mummy, it is.

So, what do you mean by everything took place yesterday?

(The woman shook her head and heaved)

Where was I? Yes, Madam Big Shoulders. When I was a young child, we were told that Madam Big Shoulders was a very tall and jealous woman. She liked having many friends and was always found in large gatherings. During her time, having many cats and dogs was seen as a sign of wealth. People had seven cats, some eight, some ten, and so on. Madam Big Shoulders had twenty-seven cats, and her circle of close friends had many cats too. But all of them, except two, had more cats than Madam Big Shoulders.

This gave Madam Big Shoulders sleepless nights. She made several attempts to break their friendship because she knew that it was the only way she could live without feeling miserable. But then again, she couldn't break off their friendship because that would mean her other friends in the circle would have to be separated from her, too.

"How can they have it all?" Madam Big Shoulders said and shrugged her shoulders twice.

She came up with another plan. She decided to make good use of her height. She watched over these two friends, in their large groups, when they walked home, when they slept. She would stand at their windows, looking into their houses. Over time, she knew when their eyelids would gradually close, what they liked to do before they slept, what their cats liked and didn't like, and so on.

One night, she waited for her first friend to fall asleep, and when she did, she entered through the window and stared at her friend's body from head to toe. She opened her bag and brought out a black nylon. She took out the leaves and lion whiskers and then inserted them in her friend's mouth. At first, the item she had put in fell out. She picked it up from the pillow, then used her fingers to widen her friend's mouth and inserted it again. This time around, the friend started chewing and swallowed it.

Madam Big Shoulders then used her fingers to open her friend's eyelid. She looked at her eye socket and rubbed her fingers around the edges of her eyes.

"Why don't I see cats when I look into your eyes? Why? I guess we don't carry anything with us when we leave," Madam Big Shoulders muttered as she dropped her eyelids.

She fiddled with her friend's hair and then stood up. She tiptoed

around in a playful manner and then abruptly stopped and walked around the room normally while chuckling. ‘What if she wakes up, what if she wakes up,’ she chuckled and shrugged her shoulders twice. She scanned the walls of the room. She paused when she saw the mirror. She went closer to the wall, took the mirror, and then climbed out of the window.

She went to the second friend’s house. When she got there, she did the same thing. The next morning, everyone realized those two friends were dead.

“It can’t be. Two friends? Died in their sleep? It can’t be.”

The villagers knew something must be done. They immediately went to the shrine and reported it to the oracle. At first, the oracle refused to see them or even respond. They begged him and offered him many cats. He then told them:

“Envy is closer at home.”

When the people heard the oracle’s statement, they knew what to do. They lined up all the friends the two women had and made them perform a test. They were told they had to cross the stream, and if they did not drown, they were free.

They also came up with a strategy to decide who would cross first. The villagers agreed that the person with the least number of cats would cross first, up until the one with the highest number. You recall Madam Big Shoulders was the third person with the highest number in her group?

Yes, I recall. So that means she would be the last one to cross?

Yes. Very good. You are following.

So, all the women passed except Madam Big Shoulders. In fact, they say, when she entered the stream, the sky darkened, and many black birds covered the sky. As she was trying to cross the stream, the waters rose up and tossed her up into the sky. All her clothes fell off her body while she was in the air, and then she fell back into the stream, and the water covered her.

Some versions of the story said she shouted, “He is lying! He is lying!” and kept screaming until she was completely gone. That is the end.

That is a very funny story. I don’t see why it scared you as a child. It is obviously a story. Also, how did they know she was opening her eyelid and stealing mirrors?

Good question. In fact, I have never thought about that. That is why I am saying that parents probably came up with it to scare us.

It is still scary; just narrating it felt like it happened yesterday.
Mummy, but what if he is lying? Like she said?
She better not be right! I guess he took our windows then.
(Both of them laugh)

A Letter by Post

It was almost midnight. Haseo of Birkini had to find a big tree that he could sleep under alongside his 10 white cows. There were not many trees around where they were. Instead, there were large green fields and a few hut houses far away around the horizon line.

Haseo stopped walking, and his cows stopped too. He stared into one of his cow's eyes and shifted his attention to the moon. The sky was quiet with sprinkles of stars.

"It may not rain," Haseo thought.

He quickly took off his garment and laid it on the leveled field and lay on it. His cows understood that they were spending the night in that spot, and they all found a place close to him and rested. Haseo looked at them with a smile as they organized themselves, and then he returned his attention to the moon and stars.

"How old are you? What are you supposed to be?" Haseo muttered while smiling at the moon and stars.

He began to ruminate on a short poem performance he observed in the village he visited many years ago. A poet named Oswald Essien of Mbia Mbong had a small crowd of people circle him while he performed with wooden figures crafted to look like a young man and a woman. And he had a circular ceramic plate to be his moon. All these figures were placed in a black cardboard mini house.

"It is funny that he came to mind," Haseo muttered and shook his head.

On a good day, he would be likely to recall the huts that seemed to have more cracks on their walls, the foods he ate in different villages, how his cows behaved, and how he struggled to find a shed for them when he was pressed or had to attend to other duties.

So, recalling the event, especially of a haggard and fraudulent-looking poet like Oswald, or even recalling his name and his sayings (which he had briefly watched), was an inward realization of something he could not pinpoint.

He had learnt from other cow owners that it was advisable not to stare too long at entertainers while travelling across villages. That is how cows get stolen, and it was a recurring practice and trade of these so-called poets, dancers, public speakers, and so on.

Haseo's attention suddenly moved to the moon again. The moon

felt unusually big, like it could pop out of the sky's blanket, like it could leave the countless stars behind.

"The moon is as fragile as an egg," Haseo said in amusement. "It is just one. Many people I have learnt about who had probably been here, those who have come, and anything that can see, has probably seen this one moon. This could even be what the poet was trying to tell his small circle of listeners. He mentioned something about eggs and sirens. What was it again?"

Oswald, the Poet:

Within my yellow container, their angelic voices pierce the walls. Poor sirens on land. Poor sirens in their yellow containers, just singing, singing, singing. They know they belong in water and crave to be drowned. But shouldn't I be in heaven? Unlike the sirens, I have been told where I belong. We have something in common, so I knock on our shared walls. Every knock only increases their singing. Their melodious voices draw me to the wall; it ties me until I can no longer breathe. Until I forget that I am on land.

They suddenly stop singing. It becomes very dark. I can no longer see my face, my hands, my entire body, but I can still feel my breath. I can hear the sirens breathing too, for I can never see them, and I have never seen them. I tiptoe to my small window and look outside at the sky. The only thing in the sky is a small yellow button. It reminded me of my shirts; those days I used to wear shirts. I stare at the yellow button in the dark sky until it becomes a white egg.

"Who kept this egg there?" And as soon as I ask, I feel the sirens turning into banshees. They are screaming. My yellow container shakes as if it is floating on top of the sea. A heavy breeze comes in from the window, so heavy like the roaring forties, that I cannot tell whether I am on land or on the ocean. I instantly think of a canoe in the middle of an ocean with a couple laughing uncontrollably. But instantly, the banshees steal my vision with their loud voices. My ears suddenly begin to leak.

I close my eyes and my ears, and then I imagine their egg-eyes cracking open, and their faces tilted upward toward the yellow button in the sky. The more I imagine them, I notice my fingers feel my ears rise. My ears grew longer than my nose, and I became an elf but also a centaur. I grew so much hair that I was not certain if I was holding my ears or something else.

I suddenly recalled eating some fruit under a tree with a naked woman. As soon as I ate the tree, I saw one of the rulers of the Sokoto Caliphate barefoot while walking his camels in the desert. I opened my mouth to say something to him, but he had already walked far away. I tried shouting, but he was at the edge of the horizon line.

It is extremely windy now, and I am alone in the desert. It is getting dark, but the moon is with me. In fact, the moon is my close friend and has moved a step further towards me that I could pat it if I stretched out my hand. I tried to pat it, but I couldn't, as my hair had covered my hands, and my hands were shorter now. The banshees kept screaming, and it unsettled me further. I stomped on the ground until I could hear the banshee's egg fall off her face and splatter on the ground. This did not make them keep quiet.

I had a plan to escape from the yellow container; I stretched my short hands to the window. I noticed that the frame was empty. Someone had taken my entire window frame and left my wall empty and vacant. I pushed one of the objects in my room close to the window. I climbed the object and sat on the empty window frame. The breeze was so strong that it pushed me back into my container. I climbed again and jumped out without sitting on the frame. As I jumped out, the wind stole me. It carried me up and tossed me until I could see the yellow button, and later the white egg, and then it placed me on top of the moon. As I sat on the moon, I noticed it was just a round bag of salt mixed with ice.

I will never speak again.

When Oswald ended his performance, his little crowd cheered him. Haseo chuckled as he recalled the event.

"Why did those people even bother to listen to a performance like that? Is it not easy for him to tell his audience anything about the moon?"

Suddenly, a cold breeze passed by, and Haseo turned to observe his cows. All of them had slept. He quickly counted them with his eyes. "Fifteen? How?" Haseo sprang up. He counted them again, but this time with his hands in the air. "Nine?" Haseo paused and looked around the field. He could spot a cow far away, close to the hut houses he had earlier seen.

He quickly stood up, put on his clothes, and ran towards the cow.

The Hole

I do not fully remember what happened. That evening, four other friends and I were standing outside in front of a small drinking bar. I do not recall the name of the bar. It seemed we were waiting for someone to join us before we headed into the bar. In the meantime, we were just filling gaps by talking about different things. It felt windy standing there. I remember looking down and I noticed that my entire shoes were covered in dust. 'What are we even waiting outside here for?' I thought to myself. After a while, two of my friends interrupted the conversation. One of them said, 'I think we should leave,' and the other added, 'That is true, it is getting darker,' and he looked up to the sky. By this time, as I looked down, I saw my shadow on the ground. It was very long and was interrupted by the shadows of the others who stood there.

The next thing I can remember is that we were heading inside the bar. This bar was underground and darker than it was outside. Although there was a green coloured light coming from the door, which was far away from the stairs we used. As we entered the bar, I was surprised by how many people were there and how quiet it was. It seemed there were up to 300 people in the bar, and there were seats for all of them. This is impressive, I thought. They may have thought about their architectural design with a lot of depth. My friends and I tiptoed to the counter and ordered different drinks. I scanned the area with my eyes for a spot to sit, and I found a place near a wall. It did not have people around there. There was an elderly man and woman close by in that seating area who kept whispering and talking with their hands over their mouths. He wore an oversized black suit, and she wore a green gown with big, round earrings. I looked at the other people. I saw that they all dressed in distinctive ways. There was a man who wore a long black top hat with a long-sleeved native shirt. The shirt had several tiny images compressed in repeated patterns. One image was an umbrella, another, a lion, and another had a beer bottle. It was the same beer bottle I was drinking. This top hat man sat with a girl who seemed younger than he was. She wore traditional clothes too. Hers had different coloured strokes, and circles repeated all over her top and skirt. They also whispered, and at intervals, she would giggle and bury her face under the table. My friends and I went to the spot I

had pointed out to them. We sat down and filled in the gaps while drinking.

What else? I think we had to leave, or one of us said we were tired. I am not too sure now why we all stood up from there. But we all stood up and left the bar.

When we got outside to the spot, we stood before we got in. It was pitch dark. We could only partially see our faces from the streetlights that reflected around. We greeted each other with a handshake and were about to depart in different directions.

I immediately heard a voice, "Stop there!" I turned around and I saw seven black giant horses. Seven men, whose appearance was not at first clear, jumped down carrying an instrument wrapped with black clothing. Before I could comprehend the motive behind their appearance and demand, they pointed the instrument at one of my friends, and he fell instantly. One of the black horses neighed and jumped up in the air. I could see the horse's yellow teeth. The seven men started laughing. one of them leaned on his horse to support him from falling as he kept laughing.

My lizard instincts kicked in. I started running in a zig-zag direction as fast as I could without looking back.

As I headed towards the left side of the road, I saw four black horses approaching. I glanced to the right and changed direction.

"What is going on?"

"Is it a takeover?"

It felt like I had covered the entire city on foot. I just kept running. And running.

But as I kept running, I realized that everyone in the city was running away from the horsemen. On different occasions, I had to change the route I took. Sometimes I followed the crowd of other runners. The fact that it was night made it feel like gambling. Every direction I took, it felt like rolling a dice.

At some point, I saw a spot from afar that did not seem obvious. This is it, I thought. I quickly blended with other runners, and when I got closer to the spot, I slowed down and then tripped and rolled over to get into the spot. The spot was like a hole in a wall. The plan worked. I was inside the hole in the wall. But then I found out how tiny it was. I could barely turn around or even stand up inside this hole. "I could hide in here till morning and then see what I could do from there."

"I cannot believe that the entire city is in chaos. What even

triggered an event like this?" I thought as I spied on the scene from the hole I hid in. At different intervals, for a moment, I could see other runners' legs passing by. Some women were shouting, while some seemed to be calling random names while crying. It could be their relatives or children, or friends.

I started feeling relaxed a bit; I could finally catch my breath.

Boom!

A loud sound came with a lady sliding into the hole.

My whole body was cold. I did not move. She was panting heavily and did not speak.

"You know two people cannot hide here?" I asked her

She kept panting.

Her eyes were wide open, and her heartbeat was as loud as the footsteps of the runners. Her scent took over the hole.

She leaned on me just like the horseman had leaned on his horse earlier.

She heaved twice.

"I have done terrible things. I don't know if this is it for me. I have done terrible things," she said while catching her breath as she muttered every sentence.

"Haven't we all? You know, two people cannot hide here?" I asked her.

She spat on my face. "Why don't you just kill me?" she asked

At that point, I had other insidious ideas, but the thought of going out in that state felt rushed.

"You can take this spot. Let's roll the dice again." I told her

Within me, I sensed that if she could find this spot too, it would only increase the possibility that another person could. I pushed myself when I saw the area was clear and jumped out of the hole.

"If this is it for me, promise me you will tell other people that I lived," she muttered

"Likewise, likewise," I responded

I was back to running non-stop. The next thing I knew, I was in a marketplace, surrounded by many kiosks and shops. The horsemen came around, and many people fell at random. I scanned the area for a place to hide. I saw a carpet shop. I jumped in from the window and got into the carpet shop. I crawled under the table and kept some of the carpets on top of my body. I could hear people screaming and shouting as they ran. Some voices were abruptly cut out. As I was there, one elderly woman came into the shop and

helped me by shifting the carpet so it could cover my legs. I had not known that the carpet did not cover my legs.

The thought of an elderly lady noticing my presence made me roll out of the carpet and jump out from the table. I kept running until I left the market scene.

The next thing I knew, I was walking on a sandy bush path which was covered with big trees and thick bushes. It seemed it was evening as I could faintly see the bushes, the pathway, and how barren the pathway was. In the middle of the bush track, there was an abandoned, uncompleted building with no roof. It looked like a cube. I followed that route, and then I started hearing voices from my back and voices far away. The horsemen were approaching from the front and from the back like two slices of bread about to sandwich me. An idea came to me. I just sneaked into the building and crossed my fingers. Some of the men came in and searched the building. One came very close to me, and then he went out.

That is all I can remember. I don't know what happened. I decided I would tell others.

Mistak

A few years ago, Mistak was arrested and banished from the village for attempting to poison the main source of water.

On that morning, he was caught with three gallons of a yellow substance. Fortunately for the village, three people were returning from *kpatampi*, a type of all-night prayer carried out from night till morning. On their way home, they stumbled upon Mistak and his three gallons, and they questioned him.

What drew their attention to him was his height. The natives in that village were often very short. The tallest person was Lazi, who had died many years ago. So, upon seeing Mistak, their eyebrows raised. Mistak did not even dress like anyone they had seen. He wore an iron armour which rattled noisily with every step he took.

“Stop there! What are you doing? Who are you?” the three men asked Mistak.

Mistak did not turn around. He opened the gallons, knelt, and bowed his head to the ground. He stood up and looked into the dark sky and at the moon. Then he took the gallons and was about to pour the yellow substance into the water.

“I said Stop there! Who are you?” the three men asked and moved closer to Mistak.

Mistak dropped the gallons and turned around to face them.

“Who is asking? Why do you want to know?” Mistak responded.

“You do not belong here. I have not seen you before. Who are you?”

“I am Mistak.”

“Mistak? What kind of name is Mistak?”

“Mistak is a kind of name given to babies born on a Tuesday night close to the seaside. It used to be a name also given to kings who originated from the Buntu tribe who have come to bring knowledge to the people.”

“That is enough. What brings you here? What are you doing with those gallons?”

“I came to bring knowledge to this village. ‘Blessed is he that understands these things as they are,’” Mistak responded, chuckling.

“What type of knowledge do you bring? Drink from the gallon,” the three men instructed and moved closer to Mistak.

“I cannot drink, lest I die. My work is not done. I have to go to a

few more villages before I can drink, as you have instructed.”

The three men grabbed Mistak and reported him to the village head.

The next day, they brought Mistak to the guillotine spot and chopped off his head. However, before the guillotine dropped, he called out to one of the women in the crowd.

“Mother, thank you for keeping watch. I knew that I existed through your eyes. Please do not skip any meal for me.”

After Mistak was killed, the village head and his advisers sensed that Mistak may have wanted to be arrested and killed. But why? They sensed it from the numerous attacks that came in after his execution. These attacks were from villagers (people from the village), and three of them, who were arrested and tried, spoke highly of Mistak as a prophet, magician, and bringer of truth. He had many names.

At first, this puzzled the village head and advisers.

“Is this Mistak not a stranger who came into our village to poison us?” one of the advisers asked in a meeting.

Another asked, “How long has Mistak been among us? How was he able to have these many followers?”

They agreed they would not kill any perpetrator they caught. Instead, they would use them to find out how many others were present and investigate what plans Mistak set in motion.

One of the advisers interrupted.

He said, “This is not a good plan. Why do we have to wait until we catch another person? What if that person succeeds in killing all of us? Why don’t we visit the oracle, Baba? He would know something about Mistak.”

The next morning, the advisers and the village head went to meet the oracle.

The oracle lived a bit far from the rest of the village. His shrine was in the middle of a forest. He had a type of tent, with big calabashes, long sticks, and broken mirrors facing upwards to the sky. The advisers and the village head stood at the entrance of the shrine and called the oracle.

“Baba, wise one, we are here. We have come to see you. Please, can we seek your knowledge?”

As soon as they said this, the oracle came out dressed in armour, from head to toe. He stood there and stared at them, then entered the shrine and came out again. This time, he was wearing only a

red wrapper around his waist without any shirt, and he was holding a long stick. He stared at them and began to speak.

“My people. Those who seek knowledge shall gain knowledge. What brings you to my place? I have not been visited in a while,” the oracle said with a wide smile.

“Wise one, I know you know everything. It is that thing that brings us here,” one of the advisers spoke.

“Mistak? ‘Blessed is he that understands these things as they are,’” the oracle responded, laughing.

The oracle told them to follow him inside his shrine. As they walked in, the village head and advisers noticed that the shrine looked exactly like the village head’s room. It had the same chairs, tables, and wall designs, too.

“Wise one, your place looks exactly like my place,” the village head said.

The oracle laughed.

“We are brothers. Why would it not look alike? An anthill looks like an anthill. A lion’s den like a lion’s den. So why not us?” the oracle responded, laughing.

“Besides, I wanted you to be comfortable. So please sit where you would usually sit. I prefer to sit on the ground,” the oracle added.

The village head and advisers sat in their respective positions and looked at the oracle, who sat on the ground closer to the door.

“So now tell me, what do you want to know about Mistak? Why have you come all the way to ask about him?” the oracle asked.

“Baba, we have a problem. We noticed that ever since Mistak was executed, a few people, our own people, have started orchestrating attacks. They have even tried to poison the water, too, like Mistak. They tried to kill one of us and even the village head. So, we are confused. Did Mistak plan all of this in advance? What does he want?”

“How was Mistak killed?” the oracle asked.

“By a guillotine.”

“Was it in public? Did everyone see it?” the oracle asked.

“Yes. It was in public.”

The oracle laughed until he began rolling on the ground, holding his belly. The village head stood up and wanted to leave the shrine. His advisers begged him to sit down.

“Wise one,” one of the advisers called, “why are you laughing?”

Should the execution have been in private?”

The oracle stopped laughing and sat up again.

“Mistak’s execution cannot be in private. In fact, it has to be public. It had always been public. I do not see how that would change.”

“How? Why do you say it cannot be in private?”

“Many years ago, Mistak was notorious for travelling to different villages, just like you have seen him do. He would always be arrested for trying to harm the village at large. He would be sentenced and then killed by guillotine. Before the guards are instructed to chop his head, he would call a woman in the crowd his mother and thank her for being there for him. This happens in every story of Mistak.”

“But why?” the village head asked the oracle.

“Mistak is a sensitive person and hates when people are isolated and alone. Each time he senses that I have not had any company, he does this act to cheer me up. Would you people have come to visit me if Mistak did not do what he did?” the oracle asked and stood up from where he sat.

“You can leave now. I have given you all the knowledge I have on Mistak. Do with it as you please,” the oracle said as he pointed to the exit.

The village head and the advisers went back to the palace. They went over their entire conversation with the oracle, and all of them reached the conclusion that the oracle should be hanged. They could not understand the oracle’s amusement about Mistak, or why he had worn that armour suit, or why he refused to help them understand Mistak’s plan.

They came up with a plan to arrest the oracle without his knowledge. They figured the only way to do this would be to travel to the next village to consult the oracle there on how to arrest an oracle without his knowledge.

On getting to the next village, the oracle there told them not to drink or eat anything for one week. Next week, at night, they should all rub clay on their bodies, from head to toe, and go to the oracle’s house. The oracle would not know they were coming, and they would be able to capture him and kill him.

The village head and advisers thanked the oracle and went back to the palace. They fasted. When it was the next week, they rubbed the clay from head to toe and waited until it was midnight. When it

was extremely dark, they walked through the bush path using the moonlight until they were in the forest.

As they were walking, they noticed many black birds flying with sticks.

“Why am I seeing all these birds? I hope Baba does not know we are coming,” one of the advisers said to the group.

“This is a forest, so it is possible that it is always this way in the night. The birds are going home. If Baba actually sees us, we can tell him we wanted to surprise him. After all, can he read minds?” another adviser said.

“That is true,” the village head added.

They kept walking, and after a while, they sensed that they were close to where the oracle’s shrine was located. They began to tiptoe and whisper among themselves.

Blap blap blap blap.

They all froze as they heard the footsteps and lay down on the floor. They saw a woman walking from the direction they were heading to. She had an upright walking position and did not look at the floor. Her neck and face position felt rigid. In her hands, she held a stick, the stick resembled the stick that the birds were carrying. After a while, she was completely gone.

“How can somebody visit Baba at this time? Or does Baba invite women here?” one of the advisers said, chuckling.

“My mind did not go there. I even thought that was Baba who passed. Did you not see that stick? Was it not the same one those birds were holding? We should go back,” the other adviser said.

“I agree. We have been walking around this forest. How come we have not seen the shrine yet? He knows. Let us go back.”

The village head interrupted him.

“Do not allow him to possess you. What do you mean by that? Did we fast and rub this clay for nothing? It is night, and that is why we have not located the shrine. Let us keep going. After all, did that woman not come out from that direction?”

The group kept quiet and began searching. After a long while, from a distance, they spotted the woman they had seen earlier. She stood close to a big cow and was milking the cow with an iron bucket placed underneath the cow’s breast.

The village head and advisers looked at each other and hid behind one of the trees while observing her. She kept milking the cow, and the cow shouted and lifted its head toward the direction

of the moon.

The woman stopped milking the cow and looked into the bucket. Then she whistled and took off her clothes. She rubbed the cow's body and then put her hand into the cow's mouth and pulled out an armoured suit. Then she put on the armoured suit, rubbed the cow, and sat on the cow's back. Then she lifted the iron bucket that contained milk and placed it close to her body. Then she whistled again. The cow ran away and disappeared.

The group stared at each other. They were all convinced that they had to go back. But as they turned their backs, they noticed a very tall wall standing very close to them.

"Has this wall always been there? Is that not where we came from?"

The group felt a tap on each of their shoulders. They gasped and opened their eyes. They realized they were at the oracle's shrine and had fallen asleep while he was telling them about Mistak.

"It is time for you to leave. You said you seek knowledge, but as soon as I began to tell you about Mistak, you could not keep watch. I told you I wanted to make sure you were comfortable. Have you received your answer?" the oracle said with a smile.

The village head and advisers stared at each other and left the oracle's shrine.

The scholar

The scholar was a man known to chase down rich concepts and ideas. Because of this, he acquired many books written by people and attended many meetings, public discussions held by people.

But after a while, he stumbled upon Cioran's book *A Short History of Decay*, and it deeply traumatised him. Ever since he read the book, he could not let go of the rich concepts and ideas he came across. These ideas replayed in his mind like a conversation one wishes they could go back to and change a detail in what they had said or include a detail.

Unfortunately, the book did not tell him anything new. Instead, it confirmed all his suspicions about these rich concepts he had been chasing from the mouths and words of people.

"Whose hysteria, fullness has been imposed on me? Has any of them disfigured me?" the scholar pondered.

But as soon as he posed this question to himself, he realised his starting point was faulty. It was built on the assumption that he was still water and or even composed of water in the first place.

I should be asking, "Is there any *I* even left to disfigure?"

He paused and rose from his bed. His bedroom was dimly lit by the moonlight which shone into his room window. He walked closer to the window frame and looked outside, around his surroundings. It was foggy and dark, but also quiet and still. There were no cricket sounds or frog sounds, or even birds outside.

From his view, he could see four small houses spaced far away. It seemed one of the neighbours may have been awake too, but he was not certain. Besides, the woman who lived with her daughter in the second house had always kept her yellow lantern lit.

"I wonder if they are still awake, and why do they use a wrapper to cover their window frame?" the scholar muttered.

He recalled the few times they had crossed paths and how jovial but odd the woman came across.

If I can recall, it was a very sunny afternoon on that day, and I was headed somewhere. Now I think of it, I cannot remember where. But we were on the same bush path, and I greeted her. It's either she greeted me, or I greeted her first. I can't remember.

She said, "Good afternoon, scholar, you are reading too much. See how you're squinting your eyes."

And I remember responding to her sarcastically, “Is it not sunny? Why do you think it is because of my reading?”

And she laughed and said, “To stories, there are no ends. Besides, the maze man who is just like you, who liked to read. He went blind. I guess they knew he would have found the end. So, they took his eyes,” she responded while staring into my eyes.

She laughed and increased her pace.

The scholar had not met her since that day, but he could not forget her intense stare into his eyes.

“The eyes are the window to the soul,” the scholar muttered as he stared at her house, which shone amidst the fog.

He thought about how dark his room was in comparison and how dark the other houses were. The walls just stood there, surrounding him. The mere fact that he could still see his walls and recognised some items in his room made him divert his attention to the moon.

It fascinated him that the moon was always there. Why was it not square-shaped like a matchbox? Or spiky? Or long like his mug? Why does it look like an egg, or one of the buttons on his shirts?

He stared at the moon for some time, and he noticed some questions arising within him.

“Can I think of the moon in a manner that could bring me hysteria and fullness? Can I be totally absorbed by it?”

The moment the scholar voiced these questions; he remembered a story he had read a long time ago. The story is often celebrated among people interested in stories for its insight into the type of anxiety that shepherds encountered many years ago.

In fact, there was a study that recently explored schizophrenia among cattle rearers and shepherds in the 3rd century. The researchers found it hard to find sufficient data to develop their claims; they could only rely on stories of this kind.

The first symptom the researchers noted about these shepherds is that they often miscount their sheep and cows, and they often abandon their sheep and cows entirely in search of one missing cow. This missing cow is an illusion made up in their minds.

The scholar paused his reflections midway and tried to recall the name of the protagonist in the story, but he could not recall the protagonist’s name. Instead, his memory was only able to bring up Oswald Essien. Oswald was the poet within the story; he is the character who performed strange poems about the moon that

affected the main protagonist.

In that story, Oswald recounted how he was trapped in a yellow container, and how he became an elf and then somehow sat on the moon. When he did sit on the moon, he realised it was actually a round bag of ice and salt.

This story troubled the scholar, just like it may have troubled the protagonist in it. The scholar sensed that the poet may have induced the shepherd with hysteria and was the actual cause of the illusion he experienced.

“But how? How does a concept or an idea even induce hysteria in a person?”

The scholar tapped on his window frame and breathed out. He stopped staring at the moon because he could not shake off the image of a bag of ice and salt. He noticed it was foggier than before. The scholar wiped his eyes and moved to his bed.

As he lay on his bed and looked at the wall above him, his mind replayed the same image it had been replaying for some years now. The same image of an empty mug on the wooden table. Each time he reaches to hold the handle, he sees the wooden table and the mug in a slightly altered position. He never sees what is inside the mug. And he does not own a mug of that kind.

So, he looked out from his window and stared at the moon, which was a better image to replace the mug. That seemed to work, but now he could hear his body digesting his dinner. Fluids went up and down like two friends were racing up a hill, and his rumbling tummy sounds would sneak in and break the silence in the room.

He touched his tummy and thought about it.

“It is interesting that I have been chasing concepts all this while and barely even thought of you,” the scholar muttered.

He suddenly felt cold. He could hear his heart pump like a little child was pumping a bicycle tire.

I cannot believe I trust that child.

He opened his mouth slightly wide, and he could feel the air come in and go out. He continued counting the number of times the air escaped him until his mind faded gradually.

As he opened his eyes, he saw himself standing by the window in a hut. It was dark, but it was not foggy. There was a huge cow close to the window. It was so close that if he decided to stretch out his hand from the window frame, he could touch the body of the cow.

He stood there looking at the cow and the reflection of the moon in the cow's eyes.

Suddenly, he heard footsteps approaching in his direction. As he looked, he noticed a young man running towards his house. As the man approached the cow, he patted it, checked the udders with his hands, and gestured at the cow to follow him.

He did not look at the scholar or inside the hut. In fact, it seemed he only saw the cow.

The scholar spoke to the man. "Is that your cow? Is it not late in the night to be grazing?"

The young man froze and stared at him. Then he chuckled. "Oswald? I did not know you live here. I just remembered your performance while I was thinking of the moon."

The scholar stared at the young man. He noticed he could barely see his eyes, although he could feel he was staring in his direction. The man's appearance also blended with the background. In fact, he could only see his teeth and his white garment.

The scholar responded, "What garment? Sorry, I meant to ask. What performance?"

"I have to go now. But early in the morning, wash your face with cow milk and salt," the young man said, and went away with his cow.

The scholar watched him, and his cow walked away. When they were completely gone, the scholar moved towards the door.

As he opened the door, he saw a shadowy figure of a man reflected on the wall, running out from the window with a big sack. The scholar chased him, but the shadowy-figured man was swift. The man hopped into a chariot that was waiting for him, put on a crown that was on the red velvet seat of the chariot, and disappeared.

The scholar stood there, wondering what the man had stolen from him.

He heard noises behind his back, and when he turned towards that direction, he noticed that there was a large crowd gathered around a man tied to a horse. He saw one of the people in the crowd holding onto a cage with a monkey inside it, and he saw big black birds flying with little sticks between their beaks.

He started coughing because of how dusty the environment was... until he woke up.

As soon as he opened his eyes, he noticed that his room was

covered in fog. He could not see any of the houses or even see any object in his room. He touched his bed and noticed it was soaked.

The scholar sat upright. He wiped his eyes and went to wash his face. He used his hands to guide him towards the room where he had a drum of water kept. He took the small basin beside the drum, scooped the water, and washed his face. After he washed his face, he reached for his napkin on the wall and dried his face.

After all this, he noticed that everything was still blurry, and his room was still foggy. He went back to his bed to lie down and wait for daybreak.

“I may just have to wash my face with cow milk and salt then. But why is this happening now? What end was I close to?”

He closed his eyes and saw the image of a mug on the wooden table.

Four Intruders

Scene – A bald man sits on a raffia mat with two boys and two girls in an uncompleted bungalow surrounded by wild leaves and plants. The bungalow has four large openings that look like missing window frames. It does not have any doors, and it does not have any ceiling or roof. Anyone who enters the bungalow can see the sky; if it rains, it will pour on anyone who is within the bungalow. It is late in the evening, and the bald man should not be seen near the village. Many years ago, he was banished from the village. However, the group stumbled upon him when they came into the bungalow for a clandestine get-together. They decided to probe him.

On that day, this little friend group went out as usual. They often met under a particular big tree which was far from the area most villagers would visit. The tree and that spot were perfect for them; they could spend time together, speak freely, act freely, and even behave in ways that most villagers would not approve of. However, that day was different. There was a big carnival in the village, and the tree spot was occupied; people from nearby villages even snuck in to attend the carnival. Some painted their faces, wore huge masks, wore big colourful gowns, and ran around with sticks, talking drums, and made hooting sounds. They threw eggs at any passerby's face. And there were a lot of camels, horses, and cows roaming around, and people laughing and touching the cows' udders. It was chaotic, dusty, and noisy. Too noisy for this little friend group. They decided to look for a secluded place where they could be themselves. They walked around the village looking for a vacant spot. Fortunately, one of them came up with an idea. "Why don't we try that uncompleted bungalow?" They looked at each other and nodded. As they walked towards the building, they all paused and looked around. Then they all ran inside the bungalow. They started laughing as they entered, and their voices echoed. One of the boys found the echo effect funny, he would call one of the girl's names and would wait for it to echo. Then laugh and lean on the wall. After a while, they all moved closely as if they wanted to hug each other, or maybe they wanted to bring out something from their pocket. But as soon as that was about to happen, they stopped and screamed. "Who is that?" the girl shouted. They dispersed and

stared at the corner of the wall. They saw the bald man lying down on a raffia mat covered with lots of leaves. He covered only his pelvic area with leaves. He lay there facing the sky and did not look in their direction.

“Who are you?” one of the boys asked the bald man.

The bald man did not turn.

“I say, who are you? Speak?”

The bald man started laughing. After a while, he coughed and held his tummy. He sat up and motioned them with his hand to come forward.

“Come and sit with me. I will tell you who I am.” The bald man responded while staring at them.

The group stared at him and then looked at each other. One of the girls asked the bald man a question

“When you say, we should sit with you, is it on that mat?”

“Of course, I would be a bad host if I did not share my mat with you. Wouldn’t I?” the bald man asked, smiling.

“Come and sit with me. I permit you to sit on my mat.” The bald man added.

One of the boys, the one who was laughing earlier on, motioned his friends with his head, and they went towards the bald man and sat on the mat.

The room was quiet.

“We are here. On your mat. So, who are you?” the girl asked.

The bald man kept a stern face; he looked at each of them. From their bodies, clothes, seating position, and each of their faces. He then plucked some green leaves from the ones he had around his pelvic area, stretched his hands, and placed one each in front of them.

“Four leaves. Four intruders.” The bald man said and nodded his head.

The bald man stared at the green leaves he had placed in front of them and then stared at the mat.

One of the boys chipped in, “We do not have all day. If we have agreed to sit and listen, why don’t you speak?”

The bald man looked at him. “Why do you think I have not been speaking? You cannot hear my voice?”

“If you cannot hear me, you should be at the carnival. But sadly, if you were to be in the carnival, you may only see the dresses, the masks and makeups, the cows, horses, camels, and hear the endless

laughter. Hearing only what leaves the mouth, and seeing only what disturbs the eye, is what they want. It is the handiwork of the four intruders.” The bald man added.

Many years ago, there was a carnival in this village. It was an event designed to allow the villagers to come outside and admire the sun, the moon, the trees, and also sing songs and play different games. This has always been the practice of this village. This practice was known to other nearby villages and even villages far away from this village. During one of the carnivals, four intruders snuck into the village and did not leave until their goal was accomplished. Even till today, only a few people are aware of these four intruders. Even those few people who know of the intruders tend to speak of them as Mistak’s relatives, or as followers of a man named Mistak who was killed in a village far from our village. Some even think that the four intruders’ story is one of the stories the performer told. They only hear the words. From what we know about the four intruders, the first intruder is an old, lanky man, and he is called The Performer. He mostly recites lengthy poems, sings songs, dances, and acts out plays in the public square. His memory was impressive; some said he knew the story behind how the rivers in the villages formed and even knew who planted the tree in the public square, and even the one your group likes to visit.

“Wait!” the group stopped the bald man and stared at each other, and back at the bald man.

“Yes, that tree too,” the bald man said with a smile and continued his narration.

The second is a woman known as the Judge. She handles conflicts and can solve any conflict no matter how complex it may be. She could also predict events. The third was a fat young man known as The Healer. He is known to have all the herbs in the world and could name any leaves, or herbs any person brings to him and can heal any type of illness. The last is a woman known as The Merchant, she brought mirrors into the village and made mirrors, and even made mirrors become a thing that could be exchanged for another thing. These four intruders came into this village with a plan to see how they could change how we saw people and how people appeared. They also wanted to change who could speak, what they could say to one another, how they could say it, and test their capacity. They did not believe in words and appearance, unlike most people today. In order to set their plan in

motion, they did not reveal to anyone that they knew each other and were never seen with each other. Secondly, they had mastered how to speak our language; they could even cough and sneeze, or break wind like we did. They wore only what you would expect one of us to wear. However, I think they struggled with the last step. But maybe it was not a struggle, for they were too organized. They all narrated the same family history each time someone inquired into their background. A few times, people would ask the performer, "Why have you all this knowledge, but I do not know your father or your mother? Permit me to ask, who are you?" they would ask him. His eyes would become teary. He would fall to his knees and begin to look up to the sky or the horizon line and stretch out his hands. Some would apologise for asking. Some patient ones would stand still. He would tell them about his father, a man named Mistak. He was killed by the guillotine in his attempt to help the village. "And your mother?" some would ask. "I do not know her, but she cares for me. My father told me he met her frozen in a darkly lit corridor at night, the moon was out like an egg surrounded by charcoal, and they stood still, suspended. They could not fight or flee or hide because the moon became bigger like a round bag of salt and ice. Their eyes widened. In that moment, my father saw the first time she crawled, her first steps, her first word, and she saw my father's first crawl, his first steps, and his first word. Their eyes widened more, and as they looked into it, they saw not only their faces, but they knew they were on earth and could die. They were afraid and could never tell anyone beyond words. From that widening of eyes, I was conceived. The next day, my mother looked into my eyes and told me she was always with me like the birds in the sky, and on the following day, she left me on his doorstep." This explanation was also given by the Healer, the Judge, and the Merchant. Fortunately for them, those who may be drawn to the Merchant may not be drawn to the Judge, or the Performer, and even if they are drawn, they may not think to inquire into his or her family background. So people did not bother to deeply investigate their family background. For a village as small as ours, is that not surprising?

"Is that not surprising?" the bald man asked again.

"It is surprising." They all responded.

"But I have many questions," the girl chipped in.

"What kind of questions do you have? The one that opens doors

or the one that corrects words?” the bald man asked in a stern tone.

“How do I know you are not lying or also wrong like the few villagers you have mentioned?” the girl asked.

“Those types of questions are beyond me,” the bald man responded and went on with his story.

These four intruders became famous in the village around the same period. The Performer knew many poems, stories, and dance steps and could perform all day and night without any visible form of tiredness. People who watched him started to develop some suspicions that he may not be human. Some said that watching him makes them feel young and makes them recall their dreams at night. Over time, he became very important. On the other side, the Healer cured all kinds of sickness, and at one point, the king's child drowned. He went out to the river and fell into the river. They organised a search for him but could not find him. On the third day, the villagers found the young boy's body by the bank of the river. His body was pale and cold, and his body swollen. The king did not eat and was always seen holding his crown in his arms. The king and his personal adviser visited the oracle to see what he could do. The oracle directed them to the Healer and told them to give the Healer four mirror fragments. The king did this act, and the Healer healed the king's son.

The Judge predicted several disasters in the village and farms would be burnt, cows would be found dead and had even predicted that something disastrous may happen to the kingdom or the village. A few days later, the king's son drowned. She later predicted that mirrors would be rare and difficult to get and advised people to get as many mirrors as they could from the Merchant.

Over that period, the Merchant made all kinds of mirrors. The heavy and bigger mirrors were said to be the good ones, and you need to give up to nine cups of rice and a cow to get the heavy and big mirrors. The small mirrors could be acquired for 2 cups of rice and a sheep. This is how mirrors became important in our village, and over time, the Performer only performed for people who had the heavy and big mirrors, the Healer only healed those who could give the heavy and big mirrors, and the Judge only entertained those with mirrors. For a longer consultation, the size and the height of the mirror played an important role.

After they set their plan in motion, these four intruders met

under the tree to discuss how they...

“Do not move!” a loud voice coming from outside interrupted the bald man and the group.

They turned their heads and saw that a large number of people from the carnival had surrounded the bungalow. It was also very dark, and the moonlight shone on the crowd. It made the huge teeth and eyes on their masks feel closer to them. As if they were breathing close to the raffia mat they sat on. Some of them held the head of an annihilated cow, and they began laughing and hooting. At some point, one of them beat a metal gong, and everywhere became silent.

“Were you not banished from this village? What are you telling these poor children?” a voice from the crowd shouted.

They started laughing and hooting again as they walked into the bungalow.